A REVIEW DEVOTED TO THE ARTS OF THE IMAGINATION
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For a second time we have great pleasure in thanking Mrs Margot Wilkie for a substantial contribution to our expenses; and also for a like sum to a friend who is also a contributor to Temenos, but who wishes to remain anonymous.

We appreciate no less those small sums that have been contributed from time to time by generous readers.

The increased price of Temenos notwithstanding, our sales have modestly risen; and we are grateful to all those friends who have faithfully supported us and made us known to others.

Our cover design 'Phoenix Egg' is specially designed for Temenos by Thetis Blacker.
My Shadow is Yours
or the journey without end of Clarence Malcolm Lowry

JEAN MAMBRINO

I have no house only a shadow. But whenever you are in need of a shadow, my shadow is yours. (Under the Volcano, p. 272)

It is undoubtedly true that Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano is a masterpiece in an absolute sense, and it is considered by all connoisseurs to be one of the most important novels of this century. Nevertheless all his other books, although they may not possess the same inimitable perfection, bear the stamp of his genius, and burn with a painful and consuming radiance. They revolve like planets of different sizes around a sun whose light they borrow and transform.¹

Up until the end, Lowry dreamed of constructing a monumental work entitled The Journey that Never Ends, with Under the Volcano as Hell and the other works – already written or else in preparation – as Purgatory and Paradise respectively. But I believe that he was misled by this Dantesque design, and that in some sense salvation too is contained in Under the Volcano, while his other works bring to light some of his hidden powers. In fact, we must allow all the different parts of his work to sing in harmony if we wish to understand the secret, both shattering and serene, of this poet who was first and foremost a man. As one of his poems puts it, ‘Pierces more deeply than trumpets do/The motion of the mind...’ It is of this unique sound that I hope to recapture the echo.²

Lowry was fully aware that what distinguished him from other great artists of his time was the fact that he was totally involved in his work, which owes its intensity and its remarkable authenticity to the depth of the human experience expressed in it: ‘...this man, while a genuine artist – in fact he probably thinks of nothing but art – is yet, unlike most artists, a true human being.’ (HL85)³ In fact, he was so deeply implicated in his book that in a sense it led him to his death. He speaks of ‘man not enmeshed by, but killed by his own book and the malign
forces it arouses.' (HL36) This experience of his is what gave rise to his vocation as a 'poet', as in the case of the Consul in Under the Volcano. 'His desire to be a composer or musician is everyone's innate desire to be a poet of life ...' (SL75) 4 Marvellously constructed as it is, his masterpiece — in which motifs, allusions and references cross and re-cross into infinity — is not a cultural product built up from the outside, out of recorded fragments (I am thinking of Eliot and Pound as well as of Joyce), but a creation born of the inwardness of a life and a vision from which there arises a kind of natural Song. 'Nor was the book consciously intended to operate upon quite so many levels. One serious intention was to create a work of art — after a while it began to make a noise like music ...' (SL197. To Derek Pethick, 6/3/50)

**The Valley of the Shadow of Death**
(first title of Under the Volcano)

I do not wish this presentation of Lowry to be centred on Under the Volcano, but I should like to recall briefly the extraordinary way in which the whole book is constructed. Its interpretation offers scope for endless ramifications. Commentators on it are legion, but they can add little, essentially, to the vast twenty thousand word letter that Lowry wrote to his potential publisher, Jonathan Cape, explaining to him in minute detail, chapter by chapter, the organization, themes and symbolism of the hitherto rejected manuscript. He concludes: '... the book was so designed, counterdesigned and interwelded that it could be read an indefinite number of times and still not have yielded all its meanings or its drama or its poetry ...' (SL88 to Jonathan Cape, 2/1/46)

One thing to note is that the first chapter begins when all is over, at seven o'clock in the evening of the Day of the Dead 1939. It then goes back a year, and starts at seven o'clock in the morning of the Day of the Dead 1938. The twelfth and last chapter begins at seven o'clock in the evening of the same day. Thus all the action takes place within the framework of seven o'clock to seven o'clock, within a diurnal cycle of twelve hours which is echoed by the yearly cycle of twelve months. This cyclical form, which is also manifested by the Ferris wheel in the middle of the square, has an obvious significance, like the symbolic number 12 which is taken from the Cabbala.
However, we are not imprisoned inside an Eternal Return, because from beginning to end there is an advance, a progression. The Quest terminates at Parian, a lost village in Mexico which is also symbolic of betrayal, since it was there that the people of Tlaxala sold Mexico to Cortes. In 1938 it was a point of reference for the fascists, who had established their general headquarters (commissariat, barracks and prison) in an old monastery! Geoffrey calls it the ‘Paradise of his despair’. In the centre of the village is a public house called El Farolito (the Lighthouse, which invites and illumines the storm). And under the Volcano is a labyrinth – the bottom of the abyss.

The subject of the book is ‘the guilt of man… his remorse… his ceaseless struggling towards the light under the weight of the past…’ writes Lowry – not forgetting the epigraph by Goethe at the beginning of the book: ‘Whoever unceasingly strives upward… him can we save.’ The reasons for man’s guilt are more mysterious. There is, of course, the rupture of the original unity of the human pair, each half of which seeks desperately to be reunited with the other. Drunkenness is an abuse of the powers of Knowledge. But all the spiritual traditions are present in the underlying structure of this work, which cannot be subsumed by the Talmud or the Cabbala. On the other hand, each chapter, which is attributed to a different person and must be read with that person in mind, presents us with a change of perspective, a change of world.

Everyone can look for – and find – the relationships, echoes and recalls between one person, theme and situation and another. For example, there is the theme of the Barranca (the Ravine, the Fault, the Sewer); or there is the theme of the Wood. The Dantesque Selva with which the book begins (‘in the middle of life’s road, in a dark wood’) recurs in the Casino de la Selva which Laruelle goes out of, then later in chapter VII when the Consul enters the sinister bar called El Bosque, and finally in chapter IX, in relation to the death of Yvonne, where the wood becomes reality and fate. (UV 18–19) Yvonne is crushed to death by the horse of the poor murdered Indian whom nobody had helped on the road, in contrast to the victim rescued by the Good Samaritan of the Gospels. (Cf. UV 375–377 & 394–395) I will not go on, for we shall be constantly coming across the themes of Under the Volcano in our exploration of Lowry’s work.
Boundless beauty above the stubble fields
(Under the Volcano, p. 58)

The tragic fate of the Consul and Yvonne, the apparent failure of their lives, like the failure of Lowry's own (although what is the true meaning of failure and success?) conceal the light that always 'roared above [me] like a vast invisible sea'. (SL 4 To Conrad Aiken, 1928) He was always possessed by a deep-rooted love of existence, by the astonishment and wonder of being, by a veritable ecstasy in the face of creation, and these shine forth in all the details of his writings with an enthusiasm which is almost like a child's, and which lasted up to the end (cf. his exquisite novella 'The Forest Path to the Spring', the last in his posthumous book entitled Hear us O lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place). This note is sounded from the very beginning in his first novel, Ultramarine:

The ship rose slowly to the slow blue combers, a ton of spray was flung to leeward, and that other sea, the sky, smiled happily down on her, on seamen and firemen alike, while a small Japanese fishing boat glimmered white against the black coast - oh, in spite of it all, it was grand to be alive!" (U 23)

The sheen of appearances intoxicates him like 'an extraordinary and unearthly reward', 'the wind racing through the blood, the sea, and the stars forever!' (U pp. 50 and 82, cf. p. 36) as does the most humble reality which he beholds with tenderness: 'it was the eye of a pigeon, moist and alone, crying'. (U 44) While he scrubs his coal-black dungarees, stiff from dust and ashes, red lead and rust and grease, he savours 'the morning's blue crystal', and the sun dancing 'on the waves' gentle fall'. (U 82)

He distributes his love of life among all his characters. Such a one is Primrose, 'a person who loves life, who expresses her creative life in the living of life', and he goes on to say: "Life is thus attracted to the person who can take her formless vast creative principle and give it a form and a mould'. (DG 215) He delights not only in the radiance of things, in the charm of moments and people, of linen drying, a little adobe house, the cat in the window, two boys rolling over and giggling, old people reading a letter, a basket of fruit wrapped in brilliant paper, but also in all the realities, prosaic or painful, that his own heart transfigures:

The lone trips at twilight too, how Primrose loved them, the trips at
twilight down the steep hill for charcoal, even standing in line for their three kilos, in that infernal scene in the dusk at the edge of the barranca, to be doled out a shopping bag full of charcoal dust by a man black as a coal trimmer: all this was life and adventure for her, and fresh, and what did this mean on the spiritual plane? (DG 177)

Spinning round in her new pink dress, Jacqueline feels like ‘a cyclamen . . . with flyaway petals’. But for Ethan who is watching her, she has ‘legs . . . so beautiful he felt as if he had swallowed a bolt of lightning’! (OF 101 & 16) The earth they inhabit seems to them ‘a clod of springtime mould’ (OF 245–246), from which clouds of butterflies, in multicoloured hurricanes, are continually escaping like a breath of glory. (UV 88 DL 186) We are always, more or less, in the Garden of Eden (we will come back to this), above all when the love of a person brings the original couple together again: ‘The earth with all its beauty was your friend, and the outward correspondence of your inner nature, when you were blessed with love.’ Is it not uplifting to accept what comes, to await in confidence everything which life holds in store for us? (OF 214) Even at the bottom of a stinking prison, a paradisal space can mysteriously take shape which beckons through all the barred windows. (This story is a personal memory of Lowry’s, who spent Christmas 1937 in a cell at Oaxaca).

Then the alcoholic child, not more than six or seven at most, that had been thrown in, and the murderer had comforted him all night as the shadow of the mescal-producing angelic policeman swung against the wall as he made his ceaseless rounds on Christmas morning and then the blue blue sky and the beautiful country air coming into this pigpen of the prison, with outside the fountain blowing, and a butterfly hovering there in the air alive with Christmas bells, black velvet with sapphire-studded wings. (DG 138 cf. HL 98)

Despite the shadows, the threats and the anxieties that weigh down all the protagonists in Under the Volcano, they are always surrounded by a nature which is almost supernatural in its splendour and majesty, far removed from mere scenery; a holy place of symbols, almost a Temple, in which the human soul (among the ‘beautiful volcanoes’, the immense fresno trees, the dawn-tasting air, the green and purple and gold of the peaks, Venus burning, and the floating vultures) rediscovers
the royal grandeur of its origins. 'My object was to pull out here all the stops of Nature, to go to town, as it were, on the natural elemental beauty of the world and the stars, and through the latter to relate the book... to eternity.' (SL 83 to Jonathan Cape 2/1/46 cf. UV 59 & 89)

As though the creatures were attached by sensitive wires to his nerves (Under the Volcano, p. 121)

This is the place to recall, however briefly, Malcolm Lowry's marvellous bestiary, which expresses his attitude of continually renewed tenderness towards all the creatures of this world. He observes them with an almost brotherly mischievousness, the dog 'lulled in a woolly soliloquy', or the billy goat with his 'Machiavellian eye', furious at having missed his target, saying to himself, 'I am still on the warpath'. (UV 150 & 152) He is conscious of the mare carrying him over the river 'with the divine surety of a Cristoferus', but he also notices the acrobatics of the birds like 'new-born dragon-flies', as well as the horse which does not want to drink but to look at its reflection in the water! (UV 153) A cat (which he calls 'my-little-Priapusspuss') rubs against him, taking him for a tree with a bird in it. And the white rabbit, eating an ear of corn, 'nibbled at the purple and black stops with an air of detachment, as though playing a musical instrument'. (UV 378 cf. 274) As Sigbjorn and Primrose come out of the little Mexican church, an enormous pig goes into it: '... the pig trotted amiably enough into the church through the open door. Then the tortured and anguished face of the dark Christ in the glass case at the door looked at him.'

As early as Ultramarine, the entire crew is upset because Adrian's pigeon has fallen overboard, and Hilliot wants to dive in among the sharks to rescue it. (U 160) This is apparently a memory of the journey that Lowry made in his youth, and that he evokes in his poem 'The Glaucous-Winged Gull':

  Old haunter of the Mauretania,
  Snowblinded once, I saved. And hove
  Out of the rainbarrel, back at heaven –
  A memory stronger than childhood's even... (SP 66)

Another memory, which Lowry refers to three times, is of the wild animals being freighted on an interminable journey during which the
boat drifts along in the fearful heat at the speed of a bicycle. Cosnahan, Malcolm's alter ego, is particularly devoted to a female elephant with whom he stays all night long during a storm, attached to her cage, and whom he refreshes with an enormous sponge soaked in water! '... in order to understand these things it was perhaps first necessary to have loved an elephant, perhaps in a measure, more than oneself...'10 (HL 164–169)

But this love is immeasurable, for Lowry, through his characters, is as sensitive to the misery of the terrified chickens, their feet tied together with a cord ('between the hand brake and the clutch, their wings linked with the levers') as to the humiliation of the bull or a wounded bat. (UV 280 & 299 cf. SP 68) He listens to the flies wailing 'like bleeding babies', and helps the turtle struggling on the pavement outside the sea-food restaurant. (U 81 UV 268 cf. SP 5, 23) In return, at one of the most crucial moments of his existence, the Consul sees the poor 'pariah-dog' come towards him, looking at him 'with beady, gentle eyes', and to which he responds courteously ('Dispense usted, por Dios'), adding in a whisper, 'For God sees how timid and beautiful you really are, and the thoughts of hope that go with you like little white birds –' Then he rises and declaims the unheard, uncompleted word, which we must bear in mind when his final moment comes: 'Yet this day, pichicho, shalt thou be with me in – ' (UV 271–272) But in this unfathomable book, the dog represents more than itself – as Lowry emphasizes – for without any doubt it is the dog who will guide the soul, leading the way, as in ancient belief, across to the other side of the River.11 (SL 192 to Clarisse Francillom, 1/3/50)

The Earthly Paradise itself
(Under the Volcano, p. 56)

This love of all the forms of life, born of a vision of the world which is essentially sacramental, is expressed in the fundamental theme of Paradise. The fact that this is so is usually obscured through ignorance of Lowry's entire oeuvre, and a complaisant obsession with the murky atmosphere of Under the Volcano, which actually describes a 'despoiled Garden' (although this is by no means Lowry's last word, even in his masterpiece, as is proved by the familiar warning on the signpost on the last page of the book).12 He never ceased to evoke and celebrate this
paradise in the works that followed Under the Volcano, most notably in
October Ferry to Gabriola and Hear us O Lord, as well as in many of his poems.
(This is the case even though we lack what was explicitly destined to be
his Paradiso, the vast manuscript of twenty thousand pages which he was
writing at the same time as Under the Volcano, entitled In Ballast to the White
Sea, and which was burned, together with all his books, when his cabin
caught fire in 1944.)

Each time that Malcolm Lowry passes through the gates of memory
and enters this Eden of splendour and simplicity, his pen is freed of its
burden and the whole page takes flight, gracefully, delicately, in-
toxicated with joy and light, borne on the waves of an enchanted
inspiration. We see through his eyes — and the eyes of his beloved —
the water-rats coming into their house, the stag swimming across the
ford, and the bears coming down to the beach on summer evenings to
‘crunch the cockles’. (OF 65) There is something magical about the
colours of the trees, the mingling of the bronze, russet and burnt gold
of maples with the faded sage-green of alders and the dark bottle-green
of pines (‘Jacqueline loved to name the colours’). (OF 247) The tides
rise as high as the piles of their cabin, the sea roars below their bed, and
the very sky does the spring-cleaning. ‘Why good God, even those
garbage-removers of theirs, the sea gulls, had the wings of angels!’ (OF
78)

Behind them is the surrounding forest, with its ‘lightness, greenness,
heavenliness’, and at dawn they go down to swim in ‘the sea which was
blue and rough, striated with lighter polar blue’, while beyond, on the
edge of the world, is ‘the horizon line jagged with deep indigo and
white peaks’. (OF 251 & 254) No wonder that they are ‘dizzied with
mountains and sea gulls and pines’, and that as soon as she wakes up,
Jacqueline jumps out of bed naked and excited ‘as a little cookstove
when the kindling catches in the morning and you have to turn down
the damper’. (OF 196 & 200) But Ethan sometimes withdraws by
himself to a corner of the forest, to play on his old clarinet ‘such wildly
ecstatic hot music . . . that when he stopped it seemed that all the birds
for miles around were singing like mad.’ (OF 169) In winter the stag
with his formidable antlers swims across the bay like a floating tree, and
the wind wails ‘as if shot out of a catapult’. (HL 216 & 225) Then, in the
evening, the moon rises in a green sky through the crystal tree trunks.
(HL 234) A strange association seems to bring all the elements of the
world together around the ecstatic couple: ‘The stars, the seabirds, their boat, their companionship, the well, the sunrise . . . And from the top of the steps between the wheelbarrow and Jacqueline’s watering can, a sudden view of cavorting whales . . .’\textsuperscript{16} (OF 181)

Life is certainly there with its hardship and harshness, its material meannesses in which quarrels break out; but it is enough to see the rain on the water between two rays of sunshine for delight and harmony to come again, with their miraculous intimation of a shining and infinite plenty. (Cf. HL 241) What they behold is not in fact outside themselves. ‘In a way he couldn’t have explained, they weren’t looking at the view, but at something in themselves.’ (OF 246) This paradise is miraculous because it is nowhere. (OF 322) Like his characters, Lowry learned ‘the philosophy . . . of the “throwing away of the mind”, where every man was his own Garden of Eden’. (DG 251) He discovered that ‘this life was the after life’, progressing to ‘a region where such words as spring, water, houses, trees, vines, laurels, mountains, wolves, bay, roses, beach, islands, forest, tides and deer and snow and fire, had realized their true being, or had their source . . .’ (HL 284) It is impossible to overestimate such an experience, brief though it was, lived by a man who was marked by a tragic destiny; for its light remained with him, in spite of everything, up to the end. A month before his death, in one of his last letters, he copied out the marvellous poem ‘Happiness’ which contains everything I have been speaking of. It may be read as his last will and testament, since he went on to write: ‘I couldn’t resist sending you this which I love and is about our old shack that we still have . . . Brother what a life that was, is.’

Blue mountains with snow and blue cold rough water –
A wild sky full of stars at rising
And Venus and the gibbous moon at sunrise.
Gulls following a motorboat against the wind,
Trees with branches rooted in air;
Sitting in the sun at noon
With the furiously smoking shadow of the shack chimney.
Eagles drive downwind in one,
Terns blow backward,
A new kind of tobacco at eleven,
And my love returning on the four o’clock bus –
My God, why have you given this to us?\textsuperscript{17} (SL 412 to Ralph Gustafson 23/5/57)
Feeling in his heart still, the boundless impatience, the immeasurable longing (Under the Volcano, p. 168)

Nevertheless, simultaneously with this taste for the most simple happiness, there existed in him a mysterious impatience of limitations, a dissatisfaction, a thirst (that word again!), an immeasurable aspiration to immensity. He is drawn to the heights in a dream of flight and snow in which his fiery soul sees itself as a lark (imprisoned in a temple?) that 'beats round arch and aisle' and tries to go 'higher, higher yearning with sharp anguish of untold desire'. (U 127) His homeland is the firmament, as is manifest in his preference, when a sailor, for the topmost sail, the 'moonsail'. He was only happy when aloft. '... I became so fond of it the captain said when I left the ship I better take it home and go to bed with it...' (OF 246 & 27)

Nothing expresses this better than his drunken contemplation of the landscape which is the scenery in Under the Volcano, and where his sailing memories come back to him: '... it was boundlessness beyond boundlessness, mountain beyond mountain beyond mountain, they could see so far that even Popocatepetl, or what looked like it, was perhaps visible hundreds and hundreds of miles behind this childhood dream of heaven, and rolling valleys, the dream of the sailor sleeping on the poop in the vast violet of the Indian Ocean as it deepens at noon...' (DG 221) He follows this with an astonishing remark which should be borne in mind: 'The sight afflicted Sigbjørn with a terrible thirst ... he wanted to gulp it all down, to drink these mountains and meadows...'. The penultimate vision of the Consul before being thrown down, though it is not his last, was of the shape of Popocatepetl, plumed with emerald snow and drenched with brilliance. (UV 413)

This is the desire which possesses him and his characters on the journey/pilgrimage where it is necessary to invent the way at every moment, since there is no right way – unlike in Dante – and the path, intertwined with the life of each person, must be constantly metamorphosed. The epigraph to October Ferry is a quotation from George Eliot: 'There is no short cut, no patent tram road, to wisdom'. (OF 8, SL 253) One must be continually leaving, setting out again, tearing oneself away, and the goal seems, mysteriously, to be unimportant: '... are we going to heaven or hell? But they are the same place, you see...'. (OF
The intuition expressed here will become clear to us later on.

One thing alone is certain: '... the soul's path lies through the thorny wilderness which must be still trodden in solitude ...' (OF 81) The fact that some ordeals are universal does not make them less painful, and some people are hurt by them in a way which is particularly immediate and cruel. One such ordeal is what I shall call the theme of ageing (heaviness as opposed to flight? the 'descent', perhaps?) — the last glance towards the youth that one must leave behind forever. In Under the Volcano, this happens in the case of Hugh, the Consul's half-brother, who represents one aspect of Lowry's character and destiny. At a certain moment Hugh discovers that he is no longer young ('at twenty-nine a man was in his thirtieth year'), and all the lapses and failures of his past, all the lost time, come together as 'the intolerable impact of this knowledge'. (UV 194) The symbol of this ageing is the sum of all his guitars, stolen or sold, whose strings snapped one after another like agonized whines. 'Each breaking string had severed Hugh pang by pang from his youth.' (UV 199 cf. 220-224)

Another, more secret, ordeal was that of sexuality, which Lowry seems to have experienced in a painful and tortured fashion. Here again we may guess at the confusion of a childhood and the damage done by an education in which the body's awakening is represented as a hostile reality. One of his characters quotes Hermon Hesse (Lowry wearing a double mask): 'As to every man the slowly awakening sense of sex came to me as an enemy and a destroyer, as something forbidden, as seduction and sin'. (OF 266) This is borne out by many observations in his first book: Hilliot's fear of virility and of life, the reference to Isabella's fanatical virginity in Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, in which Claudio is 'vowed to continence within his prison walls', his obsession with syphilis, his secret refusal of Janet's love. (V 31, 51, 72-73) The moving reunion of the Consul and Yvonne in chapter III of Under the Volcano is marked by Geoffrey's physical fiasco, which has its roots in Lowry's own childhood and which Yvonne understands only too well.22

Yvonne, it was clear to him, dreaded the approaching scene as much as he ... the perfect inappropriate moment, the moment too when, unseen by her, the awful bell would actually touch the doomed child with giant protruding tongue and hellish Wesleyan breath.23 (UV 119)
What is man but a little soul holding up a corpse? (Under the Volcano, p. 329)

We are now approaching the darkest regions of this work, or of the soul which gave it birth. Lowry may have called his characters ‘caryatids of human suffering’, (LC 292) but the suffering of which he speaks is of a different order from the ordinary trials of existence, altogether more ‘inward’ and mysterious. It seems to be related to the very roots of life, to a kind of fundamental curse, and at the same time to be exterior to the soul and alien to the true intimacy of which the soul is constituted. In the following extraordinary passage, we are presented with images of depth and fire:

...suffering... of the mind, the soul, will not stand any concrete description. Nails, even the cross, from which we take our hope, are of the earth. But the suffering itself seemed to come from somewhere else, was from elsewhere and doesn’t want to be described, and it seems in perpetual metamorphosis... Like blood, like smoke, like flame, seeping up through the floor, blooming through the window, drowning, stifling him, in spasms of anguish, sadness, and suffocation. And then like a roaring of water that never ceases, though it rises and falls like the sea smashing into a cave. Like this, but not this... like... nothing on earth at all. (LC 107)

We are not concerned merely with the despair generated by the absence of tenderness (as in the poem Delirium in Vera Cruz), or of the bitter solitude of bars when no one has put a nickel in the machine and the silence makes ‘the noise of death’. (SP 32) Lowry evokes a more absolute imprisonment, to which the theme of the Wheel, so important in Under the Volcano, is not entirely unrelated. True, the Wheel is the law (UV 261), but it is much more than that. ‘The clubs of flying machines waved silently over the roofs, their motions like gesticulations of pain.’ (UV 240 cf. 56) Is not this the hellish round of the hospital patients, who circle in silence, each one enclosed within ‘his inner Africa’? (LC 317 & 329)

In fact, we perceive in Lowry, at the junction of soul and spirit, the terrible love of death which is also hidden deep within every human mind; a dizzying wish to lose and abolish oneself, to hurl oneself down irrevocably. ‘Yet was I too that grim vinegarroom/That stings itself to
I love hell. I can’t wait to get back there
(Under the Volcano, p. 356)

One thing at least is certain: the obsessive presence of death is linked in Under the Volcano with the theme of the despoiled Garden, and thus with the Transgression. All the elements of the Biblical story are there. The Consul’s garden itself represents a miniature Paradise of exuberant charm, where from ‘under the earth’ there came ‘a continual sound of whistling, gnawing, rattling’, and the friendly serpent ‘waited to drop rings on you: whore’s shoes’. But as always in Lowry, things are not as simple as they seem, for in the same scene there is also a multicoloured insect that flies ‘marvellously’ out of the cat’s mouth ‘as might indeed the human soul from the jaws of death.’ And what is the figure in mourning with bowed head, standing in the centre of Paradise? Adam has not, in fact, been banished from the Garden; he lives there in exile, unseen by God according to Geoffrey, who adds with his devastating smile that the poor chap might have secretly loathed the place. ‘And that the Old Man found this out . . .' (UV 184)

Still, the hidden Transgression is terrifying (what does it symbolize?). The Consul, who during the war had served as an officer in the navy on an anti-submarine boat, may have been responsible for an atrocity: he may have allowed the stokers on his boat to burn the German officer prisoners alive in the furnace. He even accuses himself of having given the direct order for them to be burned alive. (The name of the steamer was the s.s. Samaritan!) (UV 79 & 175)

Thus, fire is linked with transgression, and henceforth pursues Lowry’s characters. Sigbjørn cries: ‘I am . . . burning. My soul is not a soul, it is a conflagration.’ (DG 234 cf. 135–136) Furthermore, this fire is very real, as we are shown in the extraordinary chapter 19 of October Ferry, entitled ‘Fire Fire Fire’, where we see the houses burning one after another around Ethan and Jacqueline (Malcolm and Margerie). ‘The
element follows [them] around’, and every evening they pray quite naturally, ‘Our fire which art in fear’.\(^{29}\) (OF 123 & 125)

The worst nightmares in Lowry’s writing seem to emerge out of this furnace.\(^{30}\) There is the room equipped with ‘panels of stained glass’ in which Sigbjorn rediscovers the meaning of ‘his’ book. ‘Through the red it was as if for a moment one saw the street down below with its copulating dogs less through a film than through one of those veils, flashing with hellish fire, black as soot, and livid as a corpse . . . surely Sigbjorn could not be in this room.’ (DG 146) We are at the bottom of the gulf here, hung with a network of entirely negative images. Such is the appearance in Bill Plantagenet’s dream of his wife, whose tearful face is transformed into that of the mad king Richard III, who tries to smother him. (LC 299) Such, too, is the old woman in the black veil, carrying a threatening letter in the dark (‘the morning is midnight’) ‘with hands that were not hands’, while a bell sounds on Death Avenue. (LC 296–334) And, of course, the nightmare of the scorpion raping a one-armed negress.\(^{31}\) (LC 299) It is impossible to penetrate deeper into horror, the horror ‘of man’s uncomplaining acceptance of his own degeneration’; (LC 328, cf. HL 33–37 & 82–83) but as we shall see, this is by no means what happens to the Consul at the end of Under the Volcano.

I drink . . . as if I were taking an eternal sacrament

(Under the Volcano, p. 85)

The drama of alcoholism in Lowry’s work and in his life is played out at this deep level, and is inextricably linked to remorse for the Transgression to which we cannot really put a name. The Consul drinks first and foremost in order to forget, to blot out. ‘Good God, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days it’d die of remorse on the third –’ (UV 161) Hence the benevolent nature of Drink, expressed in the names of some of the bars: El Cielo, for instance, or Todos contentos y yo también (everyone’s happy and so am I!) (DG 190; UV 295) There is, of course, black humour in some of the other names: La Sepultura, El Inferno, or the airport bar which has written up above it these words of welcome: Through these portals pass the most damned people in the world.\(^{32}\) (UV 337 & 390)

The name of this country in which everything, even his ‘love of life’ turns to poison (‘poison has become your daily food’) is Hell.\(^{33}\) (UV 82
Yvonne implores the Consul: ‘Oh Geoffrey, why can’t you turn back? Must you go on and on for ever into this stupid darkness, seeking it, even now, where I cannot reach you, ever on into the darkness of the sundering, of the severance!’ (UV 94) All the mixtures – brandy, anis, sherry, whisky, tequila, mescal (‘et la bière “au goût de glaise”’) – have the same icy non-taste. ‘The girl . . . pours a glass of death’. (UV 156 passim; SP 36) Joy plays so little part in these orgies that Doctor Vigil has no difficulty in diagnosing the obscure origins of the disorder: ‘I think, mi amigo, sickness is not only in body but in that part used to be call: soul.’ ‘Soul?’ ‘Precisamente’, the doctor said.’ (UV 188 & 51)

In this way we approach the essence of the matter. In an extraordinary passage, the Consul recalls the thousands of bottles which he has drunk and scattered in cities and oceans, one of which contains his secret, ‘the solitary clue to his identity’. (UV 334) In his preface to Under the Volcano, Lowry says that in the Jewish Cabbala, the abuse of magical powers is compared to drunkenness or the abuse of wine, and is termed in Hebrew sod. (He adds, ‘There is a kind of attribute of the word sod which implies . . . a neglected garden’). (UV 23) The beauty of a bar at dawn is greater than that of Paradise. ‘If you think it is altogether darkness I see . . . how can I tell you why I do it?’ (UV 95) The name of the last bar, El Farolito (the Lighthouse!) makes this clear. (UV 243–244) It is taken up again in the book/pilgrimage which followed Under the Volcano. ‘What soul . . . did not have its invisible Farolito, where it drank itself to awareness in the dead watches of the night?’ (DG 265)

It is, indeed, the soul which is engaged in a supernatural combat: ‘You’re battling against death . . . while what is mystical in you is being released . . .’ (UV 261); even in the sinister Farolito, composed of numerous little rooms, each smaller and darker than the last, the last of which is a den of vice. For was it not here, one night, that a beggar ‘had taken him for the Christ, and [fallen] down on his knees before him . . .’? (UV 244) These are ‘the misericordes of unimaginable cantinas’, like cloisters. (UV 81) We can see why one of them should be named, with magnificent ambiguity, El Amor de los Amores, since it is also the place where the lonely commune. (UV 276)

Lowry is aware that behind the misery of alcoholism there exists a different thirst. Sigbjørn cries: ‘Look, I have succeeded, I have transformed, single-handed, my life-in-death into life . . . there is . . . not a drop of mescal that I have not turned into pure gold . . .’
Lowry comments on these words spoken by the man who is himself: ‘Would that he were saying that! But he could pray only . . . ’ (DG 223) It is a question of discovering the nectar of immortality, that unassimilable Inn where it would be possible to drink eternally ‘a finer, ah, an undistilled wine’ (UV 344), ‘to drink endlessly, to talk endlessly, to someone’ – to drink, as if taking an eternal sacrament, a whole infinite landscape of light (which Lowry borrows from the Vedic hymns and speaks of in a lyrical passage in Under the Volcano): ‘How could he be drinking certainty of brightness? Certainty of brightness, promise of lightness, of light, light, light, and again, of light, light, light, light!’ (DG 135)

In what far place do we still walk, hand in hand? (Under the Volcano, p. 407)

Once again, the inimitable Lowry takes flight, inspired by that mirage of the heights of which we have spoken. What brings him back to reality is the ordeal, tender and painful, of love, which sets him face to face with himself and makes him realize that ‘love is the only thing which gives meaning to our poor ways on earth.’ (UV 85) As I said earlier, the ancient myth of the breaking of the original unity lies at the heart of Under the Volcano, and it throws light on the heart-rending story of Geoffrey and Yvonne, who are simultaneously united and separated – united in their very separation. In the second chapter – which is about her – Yvonne sees this clearly:

The violence of the fire which split the rock apart had also incited the destruction of each separate rock, cancelling the power that might have held them united . . . couldn’t the pieces be welded together again? She longed to heal the cleft rock. She was one of the rocks and she yearned to save the other, that both might be saved. By a superlaidy effort she moved herself nearer it, poured out her pleas, her passionate tears, told all her forgiveness: the other rock stood unmoved. (UV 99–100)

In fact, he too cries out and calls desperately on her to return; he dies of her silence, the silence of the letters she does not send him. He suffers at the thought that she may need his help, while she moans, ‘Why did you let me go?’ They call for each other’s help with superhuman intensity. (UV 85–86, 90, 93–94, 59, 193, 237, 245, 367) ‘You
are walking on the edge of an abyss where I may not follow . . . If we could . . . find again the solace of each other’s lips . . . Who is to stand between? . . . ’ (UV 387) The almost unbearable beauty of this love of theirs springs from the fact that we learn of its (apparent) annihilation even before the story has begun. In the first chapter, when the two ‘heroes’ are dead, we are acquainted with the fragment of a letter written by the Consul, which he never sent, and which the French script-writer Laruelle reads (it would have overwhelmed Yvonne with joy if she had received it) before he sets fire to it.39 (UV 81 & 87)

The whole book is interwoven with these harrowing ‘correspondences’. Yvonne finds a poem of Geoffrey’s in a cantina, scrawled on the back of an old soiled menu together with his bill for the drinks. She says that she spends her life looking for him, and writes: ‘What is there in life besides the person whom one adores? . . . ’ and adds, ‘It is this silence that frightens me’. (UV 371, 385, 386 – all chapter IX echoes chapter III) These fragments of letters compose a single poem into which Lowry put his heart and his secret. ‘Who knows why man . . . has been offered love?’ the Consul wonders, and Yvonne, unbeknownst to him, encourages him: ‘The spirits of light will help you’, and implores him, from the depths of her absence and despair: ‘I am perhaps God’s loneliest mortal . . . save me . . .’40 (UV 402) She finds naturally sacred terms in which to express her desire and her hunger for unity: ‘The emptiness of my body is the famished need of you’, and again, unforgettably, ‘My tongue is dry in my mouth for the want of our speech.’41 (UV 407).

Nevertheless, she feels (as in Lowry’s other books) that their union is in some sense indestructible. ‘In what far place do we still walk, hand in hand?’ This is the country described in his last story, ‘The forest path to the spring’, in which the life of the two lovers takes the form of a song which contains and transfigures all the realities of this world. In the middle of the night, the narrator’s wife takes him into the depths of the forest and, in a clearing, with the torch switched off, makes him lift his face in ecstasy to the blazing depths, in order to teach him the names of the stars and the secret of her love. ‘. . . how little I had known of the depths and tides of a woman until now, her tenderness, her compassion, her capacity for delight, her wistfulness, her joy and strength, and her beauty, which happened through my wild luck to be the beauty of my wife.’42 Surely it is Lowry himself who says: ‘. . . they must have
possessed a guardian angel'. (HL 17) Primrose, at any rate, wishes to
tread all the places where her lover suffered and conceived the terrible
book, and in return he agrees to relive that suffering in order to share
everything with her. In this way, joy and sorrow finally meet and
embrace. (DG 177)

No se puede vivir sin amar
(Under the Volcano, p. 51)

This phrase ('One cannot live without love') shines out not only on the
front of Laruelle's house, but at the top of every page recounting the
Consul's odyssey towards the depths. Human love extends into
universal love. Hugh, it is true, whose friend has been killed in Spain
and who wants to offer himself up in his turn as a sacrifice in the war of
the oppressed, is haunted by the desire to 'give his life for humanity'.
He dreams of saving the world even more than of Spain, and, like
Ethan, feels himself 'at one . . . with the homeless and evicted
everywhere'. (UV 148, 145, 196; cf. OF 300) Even during the cruising of
his youth, 'some inner self . . . was urging him to volunteer so that
another sea-weary man, homesick longer than he, might take his place.'

It is this same thirst which motivates the Consul, even though he, like
the others, is guilty of not having helped the poor wounded Indian.
From the start he is seen as a Don Quixote, always on the side of the
unfortunate. (UV 94) Having swopped jackets with Hugh, he
identifies himself with him at the end and pretends that his half-
brother's anarchist papers are his. The name he gives the police, W.
Blackstone, is significant in itself, for it was the name of a seventeenth
century English immigrant who left his fellow-colonists in order to go
and live with the Indians. 'Where are the slaves that must be freed?' asks
Hilliot in Ultramarine. (U 186) He goes to meet his death, in spite of the
warnings of the woman with the dominoes and the old potter. He who
had always been masked and as it were disguised by his dark glasses
takes them off at the end and dies with his eyes open, 'in a good cause',
for having told the truth, in fellowship with the poor and humble.

Under the Volcano is by no means a novel about drunkenness; like the
rest of Lowry's writing, it is a vast parable of compassion. Like the old
Indian carrying another on his back; like the orphan, touched by the
least gentleness shown to him; like the barmaid full of pity; like the
children who, with adorable sweetness, pick up off the ground everything that has fallen out of the Consul’s pockets (money, pipe, keys, glasses, passport) – it is as if every character, at some moment and almost in spite of himself, bestows on the very poorest some crumb from his own soul. (UV 321, 65, 270, 266) An example of this is the story of the little hot-dog seller in London on Christmas Eve or, better still, of the one-legged beggar, standing stiff and proud against the wall ‘as if waiting to be shot’, who leans forward to give a coin to the legless beggar dragging himself through the dust ‘like a poor seal’. ‘There were tears in the first beggar’s eyes.’ (UV 382 cf. 196)

God is hidden in these depths: ‘I heard Him weeping there’. I have already mentioned the alcoholic child who is comforted in prison by the murderer (SP 30 ‘Death of an Oaxaquenian’. cf. LC 337).45 There is also Battle, the negro who in the horror of the mental hospital sings and tap-dances for the players, or Garry, the charming ten-year-old who looks like a photograph of the young Rimbaud, and who can tell stories anywhere, ‘even in prison, or under the sea’. (LC 126) Reality meets fiction, too, in Lowry’s account of his meeting in a London street with ‘a small and very grimy urchin’, who says to him, “Would you like a farthing?” So I replied, “well why not keep it – it’s good luck to have a farthing. Besides I haven’t got a penny to give you for it.” And he said, “ho, I don’t want it, I’ve given my good luck to you.” He then ran away.’ (SL 9–10 to Conrad Aiken, probably 1932) Everywhere, these are but ‘dressings and redressings . . . replaced on a laceration of his own mind.’ (LC 308)

Almost in the middle of Under the Volcano, in the cantina El Bosque (the forest of tribulation in the middle of life’s way), the profoundest notes are sounded of Lowry’s heart and work. They come from the mouth of Señora Gregorio, the illiterate woman who keeps the squalid bar, and who turns on the fallen Consul a countenance of divine pity. She not only covers him with her maternal shadow,46 but pronounces a mysterious blessing on his future: ‘I think I see you with your esposa again soon. I see you laughing together in some kernice place where you laugh.’ Then she adds, with an extraordinary gentleness in which we seem to be hearing the voice of Lowry himself from beyond death, like the voice of an unknown passer-by: ‘I have no house only a shadow. But whenever you are in need of a shadow, my shadow is yours.’ (UV 272)
The escape through the secret passage!
(Under the Volcano, p. 391)

In this way, he who descends into the depths of the abyss with the outcasts and the lost souls – he who is utterly dispossessed – attains to the great Venite of God. Quaunahuac may mean Hell's bunker, but 'right through hell there is a path', which is perhaps the path trodden by Christ when he 'walks in this infernal district too'. If the Consul is fascinated by Marlowe's Faust and wishes like him to 'headlong fly into the earth', we can now see, like Hugh, that this 'droll descent' is necessary 'in order to repeat the climb'.

It seems that even in his first novel, Lowry had the intuition of this saving kenosis when he tells the story of Hilliot, the young middle-class volunteer who is despised and persecuted by the entire crew, over whom he thinks to triumph by climbing to the very top of the rigging! He senses, nevertheless, that the ordering of the ship takes place in the engine room, as man was taken out of the mud at the beginning of Genesis. He discovers that the stokers have more happiness in their lives in the hell below than the other sailors, and that they 'seemed somehow to be better, in some queer way to be nearer God.' He himself will not be accepted by the crew until he descends to the boiler room, to the Hell beneath, which he does thanks to his only friend Nikolai. 'The ship will only get you if you deserve it. Learn the meaning of the words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”'. Bill Plantagenet learns this meaning in the ghastly hospital where he goes to be disintoxicated:

My God . . . why am I here, in this doleful place? And without quite knowing how this had come about, he felt that he had voyaged downward to the soul core of his world . . . But here too, equally . . . was perhaps the cure, the wisdom . . . And goodness was here too – he glanced at his two friends – yes, by what miracle did it come about that compassion and love were here too?

In this way the soul thrives on its sufferings and the Furies are turned into mercies. Curiously, in the density of these writings we see a continuous transmutation, as though light were being born out of the pain itself, as though Lowry were 'empowered . . . to turn the apparent disaster of our lives into triumph . . .' Knowing this,
Primrose 'was so determined he should turn death into life she had said almost gaily: 'How I long to go to the Farolito!'" (DG 233)

Even in the stifling asylum, the condemned old man murmurs gently, 'We're all going to be O.K.', following the example of Plantagenet who has such a profound hope in himself. (LC 339 & 336) Beyond the gulf there arises 'some spiritual region maybe of unborn divine thoughts beyond our knowledge'. If but one person survives to 'love the light', there is hope; (OF 127, DG 139) for 'the star . . . shines above the lives of men', (V 32) and 'The meadows wait for the rainbows to say God'. Patience, says Lowry, is all. 'Broken tryst meets broken heart in time'. Like Robinson Crusoe when he saw a footprint in the sand, the pilgrim of life has his 'emergence . . . from Despond'. (SP 54)

The storm contained its own secret calm
(Under the Volcano, p. 58)

Countless signs such as these point the way to freedom. In October Ferry to Gabriola particularly, which is to some extent Lowry's Purgatorio, each of life's moments, whether good or bad, is finally integrated to a kind of design which overflows all the boundaries of appearances. ' . . . he felt as if he were seated at the centre of the infinite itself, then, that this was indeed true, that the centre of the infinite was everywhere, just as its circumference must be nowhere. Everything seemed part of a miraculous plan, in which nothing stood still, everything good was capable of infinite development, everything evil must inevitably deteriorate.' (OF 224) Every gesture, even the most ordinary, is 'almost godlike'. (OF 248) 'A handful of rain', tiny and soft — a lluvita — is all that is needed to reconcile the lovers and restore harmony to the world (OF 111; HG 285–286), for their soul is 'right ahead, forever in the realm of the forgotten sunrise'. For this reason, even in a storm with a force 10 or 12 gale blowing, our hero always feels safe.57 Throughout this 'journey through life', a guardian spirit guides and illumines him, speaks to him in a 'secret language', makes him realize that he is not without help.

What is it, if it is not God, or of God, this eye that hears, this voice that thinks, this heart that speaks . . . this divine speech? Like light, but quicker than light, this spirit must be, and able to be in a thousand places at once in a thousand disguises . . . this spirit that
terrifies without terror, but that endeavours, above all to communicate, to say no more than perhaps, 'Hold on, I am here!'\(^{58}\) (OF 317-318)

If we bear this in mind, the poor Consul's anguish and death take on an astonishing dimension, in which all the themes of Lowry's work are caught up and consummated: the vision of Paradise, the fall, the transgression, love, the fight for justice, the inexhaustible compassion, the mysterious kenosis. Geoffrey falls to the very bottom; he is the pelado, the thief, the toppled drunkard, caught between scorn and hate, stripped of what was most precious to him (Yvonne's letters), the object of derisive insults: 'You Jew chingao'.

It is at this point that the vision of his dream comes back to him, and he is swept away to the paradisal heights where the distant Himalayas are like Popocatepetl. His beloved Yvonne (who is in fact already dead) is climbing with him. '... now he had reached the summit. Ah, Yvonne, sweetheart, forgive me!' In his agony he hears music all round him, music by Mozart (an echo of the drunken sailor who bellowed, 'Mozart was the man that writ the Bible'), music by Bach ('a clavichord, heard from far away, in England in the seventeenth century'), and the chords of a guitar, the beloved guitar of his youth, 'half lost, mingled with the distant clamour of a waterfall and what sounded like the cries of love.'\(^{59}\) (UV 414-416)

He is alone by the side of a road where this time no Good Samaritan is seen to appear. The trees 'were... closing over him, pitying...'. Then out of the gloom shines a face, 'a mask of compassion', the face of the old violin-player stooping over him, who murmurs simply 'Compañero', before the final light of consciousness in Geoffrey is extinguished. What an ineffable benediction, this introduction into the brotherhood of the Poor, at the moment when Geoffrey is plunging into the abyss. 'Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine', thus fulfilling the promise that Geoffrey had made to the pariah dog: 'This day... shalt thou be with me...'\(^{60}\)

Hail to the sea gull, in the empyrean,  
Who man's head useth, as a spare latrine \(\text{ (October Ferry, p. 305)}\)  

The only page ('half-burnt, scorched, crumbling') that Lowry recovered after the fire in his cabin contained the marvellous prayer quoted
below, which he transcribed in his last posthumous story. It was all that was left of the two thousand pages of his projected Paradise. There could be no better ending.

Dear Lord God, I earnestly pray you to help me order this work, ugly chaotic and sinful though it may be, in a manner that is acceptable in Thy sight . . . It must be tumultuous, stormy, full of thunder, the exhilarating Word of God must sound through it, yet it also must be balanced, grave, full of tenderness and compassion, and humour . . .

I have mentioned everything in these pages except Lowry's humour, in praise of which I must conclude; for it would be a pity to forget what good company he was. Someone in a bar once said of him: 'The very sight of that old bastard makes me happy for five days.' For him, the devil was 'the enemy of all humour in the face of disaster, as of all human delight.' We sense his pleasure at seeing an invalid on crutches with a pretty girl, both of them drunk and roaring with laughter. He himself comes from the same breed as the man condemned to be hanged on Monday morning, who observes: 'This week is beginning well.'

Yes indeed: Lowry turns laughing away from all the remorse and the guilt, all the long faces. What is all the fuss about? 'It was of less significance than as if a single hair had gone grey in God's eyebrow.' And he goes off once more to his beloved cabin, which is forever his. A spring wells up joyfully in the depths of the forest. Evening falls. 'Looking over my wife's shoulder I could see a deer swimming towards the lighthouse. Laughing we stooped down to the stream and drank.'

Truly the harbour of eternity is open for a journey that never ends.

From Études, January and February 1985 Translated by Liadain Sherrard

Notes

1 Under the Volcano (UV), Penguin Modern Classics 1985; Ultramarine (U), Jonathan Cape 1937; Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place (HL) & Lunar Caustic, Penguin Modern Classics 1984; October Ferry to Gabriola (OF), Penguin Books 1979; Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend is Laid (DG), Penguin Books 1979; Selected Letters (SL), ed. Harvey Breit and

Malcolm Lowry was born on the 28th July 1909 in Cheshire, England. He sailed to Japan as a deck-boy, studied at Cambridge, lived in Spain, France and Los Angeles, and then in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he conceived Under the Volcano. He then lived in Dollarton, British Columbia, Canada, and after several visits to Europe, died at Ripe in Sussex on the 27th June 1957, ‘by misadventure’. It suffices to say that he had just been listening to The Rite of Spring on the radio. Malcolm Lowry’s neuroses and alcoholism do not account for his L’Oeuvre!

— Referenced in the text—

Hear Us O Lord, p. 85. Cf. his derisive scorn of ‘modern literature’ and the ‘housemasters of . . . the “new criticism”’, ibid., pp. 74–75.


Cf. Under the Volcano, pp. 99–100. These attributions are not made explicit in the book, but they are as follows: Chapter I, Laruelle; Chapter II, Yvonne; Chapter III, Geoffrey; Chapter IV, Hugh; Chapter V, Geoffrey; Chapter VI, Hugh; Chapter VII, Geoffrey; Chapter VIII, Hugh; Chapter IX, Yvonne; Chapter X, Geoffrey; Chapter XI, Yvonne; Chapter XII, Geoffrey.

Cf. p. 29, his wonder on entering a large Chinese port which ‘meant perhaps to a young scared faced the marvels of an unknown land . . .’

October Ferry, p. 21. Cf. pp. 20–21: ‘. . . if you had love, even if you’d lost all your worldly goods you simply spoke the truth when you said, “Isn’t Life Wonderful?”’ And again: ‘. . . the truth of beauty above, which love perceived through its own eyes, and to which it mysteriously corresponded.’

Dark as the Grave, p. 203. Cf. Hear us O Lord, p. 98: ‘. . . the love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth.’

Selected Poems, p. 66. Cf. Under the Volcano, p. 195, where Hugh recalls the gull that he rescued in his childhood.

Cf. Lunar Caustic, pp. 300 and 312: the story of the baby elephant which falls into a pit while chasing butterflies.

‘. . . the dog, one hopes, will lead him across the river to the other side – as ancient belief has it – and at all events not down the abyss.’

‘Do you like this garden which is yours? Don’t let your children destroy it!’ Under the Volcano, pp. 416, 172, 275.

Lowry experienced this Eden in the hardest material conditions, when he lived in his shack in the west of Canada. There he overcame his alcoholism, experienced love, and wrote his masterpiece.

Ibid., pp. 251 and 245. Cf. p. 208: ‘. . . the clouds were reflected six miles deep in the water, and it was like flying among these clouds, half-fish, half-bird, deep among the minnows and the reflections of pines and kittiwakes . . . A longing for the pure intoxication of sobriety possessed him . . .’

This forest of crystal glitters in Under the Volcano like a memory of the lost Paradise, p. 166. Cf. Hear us O Lord, pp. 250 and 253; October Ferry, pp. 253 and 254.

Cf. p. 293: ‘. . . what would the cabin and their life on the beach have been without Jacqueline’s love?’
Selected Letters, p. 412 (to Ralph Gustafson, 23/5/57). Lowry died on the 27/6/57. Cf. his astonishing last letter with the quotations from Wordsworth’s Prelude, which say the same thing so unforgettably.

He adds, with significant emphasis: ‘... like the temptation that the devil showed to our Lord.’

Ibid. Cf. Under the Volcano, p. 168, where the same landscape is linked to a desire for expansion and goodness. Cf. October Ferry, p. 250: ‘... holding up the glass to the light and drinking, one might have felt ... as though drinking down the day itself ...’

October Ferry, p. 8. Selected Letters, p. 253 (to David Markson, 25/8/51): ‘... no wonder Dante found the straight way was lost. There is no straight way. There is no path, unless metamorphosed.’ Cf. Dark as the Grave, pp. 111–112 and 216, and Lunar Caustic, pp. 310–311 and 329.

Ultramarine, pp. 31, 51, 72–73. In October Ferry, p. 19, Ethan speaks of ‘some feeling of general frustration, more often sexual’ which is mingled with guilt.

The poem by Goethe quoted here tells the story of this bell, which falls from its steeple and pursues a little girl who did not want to go to church. Lowry spent his childhood in the shadow of a God of wrath.

Under the Volcano, p. 119. Cf. pp. 118 and 110. We must not exaggerate this, however, for there were other moments. Cf. October Ferry, p. 196: ‘Post coitum omne animal triste est ... That again was not always true in the cabin. It could be succeeded just as well by exhilaration, bursts of humour ...’

This circle is hell. Cf. Dark as the Grave, pp. 135–6.

Ibid., p. 262. Cf. Ultramarine, pp. 40 and 44, and October Ferry, pp. 135 and 198.

There exists, of course, a relationship between this suicidal tendency and alcoholism, but in his writings Lowry gave a different meaning to the theme of drunkenness, as we shall see.

Under the Volcano, p. 184. Cf. p. 174, the gulf running through the centre of ‘the public garden’ into which the Consul seems ‘petulant to fall’.

Ibid., p. 184. The name of the Chief of Gardens with the beautiful hands of a murderer, who orders Geoffrey to be shot in the last chapter, is Fructuoso Sanabria: fruitful well-being!

Cf. pp. 142–143, the man who is burned alive although his clothes are untouched by fire. And Lowry’s own cabin, of course.

It must be said that this is not theological hell-fire. Cf. Under the Volcano, p. 243: ‘... had anyone ever given a good reason why good and evil should not be thus simply delimited?’

Cf. p. 339, the dreadful dreams about the tortoise looking for its shell, the bird flying with one wing. The unfortunate animal kingdom is in chaos. Cf. Under the Volcano, p. 192, where the insect world closes in terrifyingly on the Consul.

Ibid., pp. 337 and 390. Lowry suggests that his first name, Clarence, had been bestowed on him prophetically, because of the character in Richard II who drowned in a butt of malmsey! Selected Letters, p. 251 (to David Markson, 25/8/51).

It is a place of terror; ibid., p. 94. Cf. Selected Poems, p. 34.

Dark as the Grave, p. 265. Cf. p. 263: ‘The Farolito was somehow associated with freedom.’

Under the Volcano, p. 261. The Consul likes to quote Blake’s ‘The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’. The woman at the bar says drink instead of think; ibid., p. 271, and the drunken Canadian sailors say that they are at Calvary instead of Calgary; October Ferry, p. 62.
This is the place where the Consul recalls the child whose life he saved by rubbing its chest for an entire night with tequila.

October Ferry, pp. 45–47, and Lunar Caustic, p. 345: Bill, in a church, raises his bottle to the Christ in the painting who is being offered a drink.

Under the Volcano, pp. 85 and 169. The Consul’s favourite brand of cigarettes is called Alas!

The fragments float upward like the wings of the vultures at the end of chapter III, in which we learn of Yvonne’s love.

Cf. p. 404: ‘Without you I am cast out, severed. I am an outcast from myself, a shadow –’

Cf. ‘What release can be compared to the release of love?’ Cf. also Selected Poems, p. 55: ‘Two pillows look to love to save the world’, and p. 46: the smell of books that they have looked at together.


‘... how, unselfish as she was, she delighted in treading these walks Sigbjorn had brought alive for her or that she herself had made alive ...’

Ibid., p. 94. Cf. the allusions to windmills in chapters III, IV, VIII and X. In this same bar, Laruelle had seen him once give all his money ‘to a beggar taken by the police.’ Ibid., p. 77.

The same theme occurs in the poem ‘In the Oaxaca jail’: ‘In the dungeon shivers the alcoholic child/Comforted by the murderer ...’ Selected Poems, p. 25.

Geoffrey initially thinks he can see his own mother in her face.

Cf. Selected Poems, p. 55: ‘... you are free, being bereft’.

This is related to the memory of Paradise that I referred to above. Cf. Selected Poems, p. 64, and Lunar Caustic, p. 327.

Height and depth are united in this image.

Cf. p. 282, the reference to those people who enjoy jumping around in streams of molten lava.

The two friends are Mr Kalowsky and Garry, the inspired child we have already encountered.

Cf. p. 260, ‘the ... mystical experience of suffering ...’, and p. 158, Lowry’s own assertion: ‘If I were to write my book again, I’d argue that in the main it’s a constructive thing.’

Cf. October Ferry, p. 97, the wonderful telegram saying: ‘Sometimes soul needs atomic explosions’.


Cf. the whole of chapter 27, with its extraordinary sequence of hoardings.

Hear us O Lord, p. 89: ‘... we were safe in the midst of chaos ...’

Cf. pp. 294 and 302; Dark as the Grave, p. 261: ‘He was an actor in this film; God was the director ...’; Hear us O Lord, p. 61, where God is compared to the engineer in the control tower of the Panama Canal.

And the whole of the last chapter.

The word ‘dog’, spelt backwards, is ‘God’ – something we can be sure occurred to Lowry. Cf. Dark as the Grave, p. 239: ‘The spirit of the dog was supposed to reach the far side of the river in advance of the man, and upon seeing his master would jump into the water and help him across.’
Lowry's writings are full of prayers: Ultramarine, pp. 31, 40, 77; Dark as the Grave, pp. 111, 144, 253; October Ferry, p. 293; and, of course, Under the Volcano, pp. 330–331, 340—the prayer to the Virgin 'for those who have nobody with'.


He adds: '. . . it is necessary to go beyond remorse, beyond even contrition', p. 284.

Cf. Hear us O Lord, p. 13, the couple smiling 'as much as they could while eating hamburgers'. Cf. p. 250.

Cf. Hear us O Lord, p. 275, where the old Scotsman dies saying 'I never felt better in my life.'

These are the last lines of the story, and the last lines of the book.
I begin by quoting some stern but challenging words written by a young monk, Father Symeon Grigoriatis, living on Mount Athos today. He speaks from an extreme and exigent point of view, but I believe that we live in an age where mild words no longer communicate: we live in times when as Christ warned us ‘The love of many shall grow cold’.

Father Symeon writes: ‘We have the privilege of living in an age in which stone piled upon stone no longer remains. The last consequence of the values and ideals exalted by Western society has been the disintegration of society. I consider it a quite positive and challenging fact to live in a culture in ruins. Those values and ideals’, he goes on, ‘were idols destroyed by the power of their own deceptive effectiveness. Now,’ he says, ‘we have the possibility to begin anew with the enriching experience of the past’. As an Orthodox monk, Father Symeon says, ‘I believe in the fertility of zero. . . . Western man’, he concludes, ‘has exalted man not only to abandon belief in God, but even in man himself.’

Something of this can be translated into the situation I find myself in, working as an Orthodox Christian, composing sacred music at the end of the twentieth century. Art cannot renew the sacred, but it can (no less now than at any time) be a vehicle for the sacred. Nothing in this world, loved into being by God, is of itself secular, only that we as human beings have made it so. Writing religious music today therefore could be seen as a kind of non-physical martyrdom.

It has often been said that Christian sacred art has gone in a sweeping down-hill spiral since the Middle Ages. In painting, as the artist moved further and further away from the Primordial Tradition of the Ikon, the paintings became more and more secular. A similar situation can be said to have happened in music as we have moved further and further away from the Primordial Tradition of Chant, and music has become more and more secular. We can talk of ‘Masterpieces’ in human terms, and they have occurred in abundance, but how often do we say how
wonderful is a piece of music by 'X' or 'Y' as an end in itself, and not as transparent to God? Perhaps these great artists are our fellow travellers, but they are not our guides. The guides are the canonical scriptures and the revelations of the mystics, with their logoi spermatikoi or 'seed-bearing words'. But man on his way stops to 'hear' and to 'see'. Another way of putting it perhaps is to say that a poem by George Herbert like 'Love Bade Me Welcome' is great art, but the 'Lord's Prayer' is more than that — it is revelation and even incarnation.

The whole purpose of sacred music must be to lead us to the threshold of prayer or to the threshold of a true encounter with the living God. For the sacred is prior — ontologically prior — to art and is totally unaffected by anything art can do, or cannot do, although of course if it does possess a sacred quality, it can certainly help us to renew our awareness of the sacred. An Ikon for instance, is not art — it is beyond art — because it is a real presence that we venerate, a still, almost silent presence looking tenderly at us, helping us to pray, and lifting our minds and hearts above this earth (where we are in exile for a short time) into Heaven, our true Homeland. In a different way music should enable us (without imposing itself) to truly 'lay aside all cares of this life'. Not to ignore this world — as the great Russian theologian and priest, Father Alexander Schmemann, has said 'It seems natural for modern man to experience the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God. It seems natural not to live a life of thanksgiving for God's gift of a world. It seems natural not to be "eucharistic".' You cannot talk about the sacred unless you also talk about God — the presence of God — the presence of the Divine is the initial and ultimately unique presupposition of the sacred, because without that presence there is no sacredness anywhere. Our contemporary world has accepted the all-embracing secularisation which attempts to steal the world away from God. In a beautiful piece of Byzantine hymnology, Adam is pictured sitting outside, facing Paradise, weeping. It is the figure of man himself.

So where does the twentieth-century artist concerned with the sacred stand with regard to all this? The modern artist is isolated: he is an eccentric. He has the same natural and normal incentive to creative activity; he has the same thirst for objective truth, the same loves and hates. But he has not the same clientele, no longer is he naturally employed as part of the ordinary company of builders or furniture-
makers. There is no natural or proper place for anything he makes. The concert-hall isolates him and his work from everything around it. It is not he (or she) who is abnormal: it is his age and its circumstances. (I should say that I am speaking about this in a Christian context, because that is what concerns me, but much of what I say can be applied to other traditions.) I would like to stress at this point that theology (in any tradition) cannot be 'used' – it must 'use' us. Once upon a time the artist was often the anonymous painter of Ikons, the composer of chants for huge liturgical structures. He or she once fasted, prayed, attended all night Vigil Services. Christianity was integrated completely into their lives. To live, was to adore, through every note, through every brush stroke, the one and only creator, who, as St John Chrysostom said, 'has allowed us to bring Him offerings for the sake of our salvation'.

Viewed in these terms our contemporary culture is indeed in ruins. We have lost all those values, all those ideals. We must somehow find again our single, simple, and original memory. We have this possibility with the enriching experience of the timeless. To steep ourselves in Primordial Tradition. This is much more than pure Tradition alone. It stems from the beginning of time itself, from the Ages of Ages. I am more concerned here however, with Primordial Intuition. As Orthodox Christians we believe that the mind must enter the heart. So we no longer make decisions with our natural intellect, but rather within the heart with our 'spiritual mind'. As Simone Weil, that great Western thinker, has said 'our ego-based imagination closes the cracks where Grace can penetrate.' And this is the first symptom of the profane mind – of the idolatrous mind – in separating its ideas from God – ideas of earth, nature, art or life. Once we have separated these ideas from the idea of God, we have set out on the path that leads to the desacralisation and ultimately to the destruction of the things themselves.

In a sense the artist is lucky because he has the gift of intuition to a high degree. This may lead him to Primordial intuition; but one can see all over our chaotic century examples of composers and artists, who instead of redeeming, only add to the world's suffering and add to the Cosmic Evil. And what is worse, man has developed a taste for the ugly, the opaque, every kind of novelty, the purely intellectual and the over-complex. He can no longer respond to primordial beauty, primordial transparency and primordial simplicity, because he does not see the transcendental in everything. And by that I mean he does
not see that which lies beyond the psychological and physical realm or that which lies within and beyond nature. But if once you touch, literally, on gospel truth, if you dare as an artist to touch Christ, you cannot contort, pervert, amputate or manipulate. Here lies the danger of the clash between artistic truth and theological truth. Here there is an incompatibility. But although art cannot express a theological truth, a theological truth can surely be found inside the art.

Great writers, near to the Church, but not totally within it, like Dostoeievsky and Papadiamandis, have understood this very well. Dostoeievsky shows us a theological truth inside a novel like The Brothers Karamazov, but he does not attempt to write a novel about St John, for instance, chatting with the Virgin Mary! That would be a perversion and an amputation. In a more simple way Papadiamandis does the same thing as Dostoeievsky. Papadiamandis, speaking of the Orthodox Church in Greece has said that the great spiritual tradition has survived in that country in spite of Venetian invasion and in spite of domination by Islamic Turkey: 'the faith in Christ does not change', he writes, 'and there has been no Renaissance, no Reformation – the same spirituality, the same need for beauty and truth.' He speaks elsewhere about the island he lived on, Skyathos, saying it 'incarnated' this faith. ‘The same sun, the same trees, the same plants, the same birds, the same animals, the same men, the same unhappiness, the same death, — and the same inexplicable mystery and transcendence.’

As Papadiamandis understood, we have the possibility to begin anew, with the enriching experience of the past. St Augustine has said of Divine Beauty that it is at once so ancient and yet so fresh. But when we lose contact with the Divine, or when we ignore the transcendent, we not only cut ourselves off from the source of sacredness, but also fall into a state of disintegration, sickness and self-division.

The contemporary composer, no less than in other times, must become so transparent that music literally flows through him, and he rediscovers a music that is at once so ancient and yet so fresh. In my own case I have begun to try and find something of this in the Primordial Tradition of the Orthodox Church – to become saturated by the splendour of Byzantium – its chants, its structures, its poetry. It is not a question of aping the past, rather of immersing oneself totally in it, then being silent, and then allowing the Primordial Tradition to flow through one, so it becomes at one with us, and it also becomes part of
us. Any original elements are only new expressions of the same tradition. However, this cannot happen in an academic way. If it did the result would be dead, and dehydrated. I personally happen to love Greece. I try to live there as often as I can. Listening to the services, attending monastic vigils, listening to the sea, listening to the pines, which as St Nektarios has said, have not forgotten how to praise God, and then perhaps to begin to hear a ‘silent music’, to hear a music that begins to ‘sound’ like an ikon with its tender and still gaze.

Two years ago, I was asked by Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford and Bishop Kallistos the Greek Bishop to compose a setting of the Orthodox Vigil Service, to be celebrated in an Anglican Cathedral.

I knew of the immense task that this presented me. I remember praying in front of an Ikon of Christ and saying, ‘Lord, I know nothing, I can do nothing without you. I have forgotten how to write a single note, let alone a melody. Teach me Lord, show me the way once more.’ I had to compose a music that would be prayed to, lasting over two hours. This of course was the norm for a Byzantine composer. I made a study of Byzantine and medieval Russian chants and then was silent. After a while a music began to flow through me that had its roots in both traditions, but in a way seemed different from the two traditions. After all, I am not Greek and I am not Russian and something of my own musical language would play its part.

The contemporary Greek poet, Seferis, has said, ‘Byzantine art differentiates itself from the norm by only minute deviations. Western art, however, differentiates itself by colossal deviations from the norm, thus producing’, in Seferis’s words, ‘the danger of total dissolution.’

The root of our problem is that we can only fulfil our intuitively priest-like function as artist on condition that our own inner world is animated by God. To quote Father Symeon once again ‘modern man is playing at being God. Possessed by madness and horror he is deceived by the illusion of becoming god without God.’ Not that I mean for a second that artists are above anyone else in morals. After all, only God knows that. Think of the thief on the cross opening the way to Paradise. The immorality and licentiousness often found in artists does give us a hint of the mystery of judgement, God’s judgement – not ours, so often found in the Gospels. Perhaps God himself had to leave alone constricted souls who thought ‘they were good’.

But let us now return to what we actually can do. Surely we cannot
allow extreme tendencies of fundamentalism and secularization, or frantic attempts by churchmen to reduce the music and hymnography of the Church to ‘nursery rhymes’ without tradition, or even worse, to be seduced by the thousand enticing novelties into which the twentieth century is plunging.

Also, the music must perform a precise theological function. It cannot be just aesthetics to raise the spirits. It must be like the Ikons which help us to survive the lonely gap between the church in heaven and the church on earth, and like the incense which is the smell of the promised Resurrection: the smouldering carcass is now the scent of life eternal. Yes, all this and more, if we would truly worship Christ who has come, who is still to come, and who is sacramentally present in the Church, sacramentally present in everything if we could only see. Only then can the sacred be restored – only then can our feeble attempts have any point or justification beyond passing fashion, pornographic or intellectual titillation, or just an excuse to hang our dirty linen on the line. But even so, if we do manage to cover some real distance along the way, fullness of spirit can never induce a feeling of satisfaction, for every fullness creates in us a new tension and a sense of want, due to the perpetual gap between the fullness we receive in the present and that duly prepared for us in the future.

I think it was Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow who said ‘God did not so much create the world but rather loved it into being.’ It is only through God who is all love, from that ultimate irreducible touchstone, that we can begin our intuitively priest-like role as artists.
Olive Fraser (1909–1977)

I brought strange Algol with me
And Betelguese . . .
(The Unwanted Child)

Olive Fraser declared herself born under two stars at odds, the one bringing all talents and honours, the other mischief and evil chance. She belonged to Nairn on the Moray Firth, where she grew up in the loving care of her great-aunt. Born of a secret marriage, she was very much an only child. Her father emigrated to Australia before she was born and her mother was ‘away working’, or during the First World War years, in Australia also.

Nevertheless she lived an untrammelled childhood of happy achievement at school and wild escapades after hours. At Aberdeen University she flourished, winning high award in English Literature and in poetry. She was good-looking, gold-haired, fresh-cheeked, and with a remarkable blue gaze, exuberant and mad-cap, witty and eloquent in student debate. Later at Cambridge she wilted, her health mysteriously deteriorated. But she won the Chancellor’s Medal for English Verse in 1935.

When war came she served in the WRNS and naval intelligence, but direct experience in the Mersey blitz broke her in mind and spirit. Her war poems express both the terror of the outer conflict and her inner horror of being implicated in destruction. From this point her mental health was undermined.

After the war she tried librarianship in Oxford, where her friends numbered the Pasternak ladies and Oliver Zangwill, whom she had known in her Girton days. Later, removed to London in 1949, she lived for some years at 77 Royal Hill, Greenwich, in those days a very humble address indeed. Sure of her vocation as a poet, she braved poverty in order to have time to write, subsisting on chance scholarly commissions, casual jobs or ‘the dole’ when all else failed.

In 1951 she ranked equal first with Alexander Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith in an Arts Council contest for poetry in Scots and won a third prize for a play. Her gifts and her precarious fortunes became
known in the North and Sir Compton Mackenzie and others showed concern. She published in *The Mercat Cross*, an Edinburgh periodical published by the Jesuit Order, and some of her lyrics became favourites in Scotland.

By 1952 she had been received into the Catholic Church. By 1954 she had assembled some forty poems but had no feasible plan for publication. Her health and her fortunes spiralled downwards and she attempted to take her life. From 1956 onwards to the end of her days she was in mental hospitals or, if precariously out in the world, under hospital care. But she continued to write – in flashes – even while desperately ill. In 1961 she moved back to Scotland, to Inverness then to Aberdeen, where old friends found her dreadfully altered, but determined in her devotion to poetry.

In 1965 an alteration of medication brought an improvement in health, and soon treatment with thyroxin wrought a spectacular transformation. She rejoiced in health and well-being for ‘three wonderful years’; poetry flowed from her mind and pen. Of her whole poetry, of the lines that are datable one half belong between 1970 and 1974.

In the end she died of cancer in 1977, penniless and intestate. A small collection of her poems was made in 1981, *The Pure Account*. It was not until 1982 that her papers were recovered from America, where they had been shipped to distant relatives. There were revealed some 400 lyrics and the verse play. Here was ‘my book of poetry’ she had often spoken of but no-one had seen: war poems and devotional poems, the new poetry for Scotland she was planning in the 1950’s, poems of Celt and Viking in earliest times, of ballad magic and adventure, of the clearances. Here was personal poetry of love in all its guises, but also of hate and discord, the non-communication of the schizophrenic, hospital poetry of community and isolation, many lyrics of wild country and its wild creatures, and fine poems on childhood.

Now it is planned to publish some 200 of these lyrics, along with letters and her life-story, whose unravelling has proved a long task. Mental illness makes for reticences and highlanders can hold their tongues and their promises. Three separate strokes of evil luck meant that for Olive Fraser the Highland web of kinship was not there to save her in distress. Her first cousins, her contemporaries, did not know she existed. It is indeed a story of Algol, but of Betelgeuse also, for we have the poetry.

*Helena M. Shire*
Extract from Poeta, written in the manner of a 'letter to the editor' or newspaper follow-on. It would appear to be a riposte to an article by Felix Barker entitled Genius Unknown — Report on Youth, dated March 5th, the year probably 1954, in The Sunday Times. His article had argued that the young poet nowadays in the nineteen fifties had a far harder lot than young writers had in the nineteen thirties. Olive Fraser who knew both decades, disagreed.

. . . In the past 20 years I have won 22 literary prizes and 2 gold medals and I have managed to publish 7 small poems and a short story. People who do not write might wonder why or how I go on. Well, wait till I find the New Testament, which is somewhere in this clutter.

See, in the Gospel of St John, where Jesus says to the Twelve 'Will you also go away?' and St Peter answers 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

That's it. It is not possible to turn away. The very thought of never experiencing again that strange visitation of a power unknown which precedes the writing of poetry is something to make one willing to accept all things. Not that I have ever liked being hungry or poor. But if that's the way it has got to be, I would rather have it that way than not at all . . .

Hunger, sickness, loneliness, uncertainty and frustration are easier things to bear when one is older. They may even, if you can bear them long enough, be mysteriously valuable. But you will never write what you might have written, because you will no longer be the same person. That person, whom nature sent into the world with an equipment she devised for the first time and which she will never repeat anywhere, is dead. You may, if you have the singular desire to write which makes all distresses ghosts, write far better than if you had never known these distresses, but the first poet will have to die first . . .

I would not like to bet on something so rare and miraculous as the rising of the phoenix because I think that many true poets have died from discouragement for whom no phoenix has ever risen . . .

Olive Fraser 1954
77 Royal Hill, Greenwich

Texts by Olive Fraser are copyright Helena Mennie Shire
The Sleeper
(from a quiet night-watch on Liverpool docks)

All the holy sea sleeps here
In this quiet sleeper's ear.
The winds for his great vessel, his Andromache
Dwell in this blood's profundity.
O enchanted west,
O thou huge east that settest never in this breast,
You royal heads and oceans lone
Whose dawns yet shine in this entranced bone,
And the inbearing tide,
That with his brain some music dost divide,
Currents in azure straits that rise,
And the south and north skies,
And planets, stars that never part
But make your zodiac this heart—
Ye never silent, silence keep
In this dim room, in this untracing sleep.

1941

An Experience

Sometimes upon some silent street
A passer-by will say to me
'You, the stranger whom I meet
Are come to take my own from me,
My safety and my soft retreat.'

What is this thing? I do not know
This brawler, nor have seen before
His face, for with my songs I go
Unseeing, maybe by his door,
And now he melts my lines like snow;

And they are gone and I am left
With this outraged, contorted man,
And both of us besieged, bereft
For some dark reason that I can
Never trace to its hiding-cleft.
Is it his soul that he doth see
And hate to see within my look,
A much-scrawled sheet, a tragedy,
The peril of some traveller's book
Who has come close to death to be

At last upon that city lane?
Or is it some more earthly thing,
Poor shoes, poor raiment, world's disdain
Shown in my mended covering
That minds him on the dust again?

Or is it something dire in me
That looks upon him I see not
But that all other men must see
And shrink to see, some flaw, some rot
Within the soul's wide mystery?

I do not know, but know we who
Confront upon that quiet street
Among the church bells and the dew
Are enemies from the hour we meet,
And I dread him and his thoughts too.

18th December 1970

To London

I come to thee from sweeter dreams
And from a fairer love.
I have known the departure
Of the last star above
Ben Dearg and Sgurr na Gillean
When no mouse doth move.

Here I have but a hearthless room,
A shaking window frame
And a rended roof over my head
— 'Tis all on earth I claim —
But the great hills still wait for me
And call me by my name;
For my name is as old as the rock's blood
And they and I are one,
Only dark Algol, the Pleiades,
And Pegasus alone
Looked on the world to shine on us
When we should be begun.

Tonight the night blows over Glen Brittel
The peregrine stoops no more,
Shuttered behind her eye's thin membrane.
Shadows sleep on the floor,
But from every shadow and cranny
My own watch evermore.

I am not away when absent.
When absent I am still
Walking the wild ledges,
The saddlebacks until
Each root, each whitening water
Rises upon its hill.

What canst thou do to defeat her . . .
Blaven . . . this winter's night?
Thou hast nought but a lean cat
Below a neon light,
The tide keeping the cold steps,
The buoys burning bright,

Marking the empty channel
Where no ship goes down
Between the blinded windows
Of all the footless town.
I shut my eyelids. Behind them
A cloud forms like a crown.

27th January 1971
To one who sleeps by night and day

Hast thou such wastes within that thou must sleep
To dull the raindrop on the window pane
Lest thy life, hearing it, should stir and weep
For all the things thou did'st exclude in vain,

The rare, the painted hour, the exquisite
On which thou turned'st thy back and still did'st sneer
That these were but void myths? The morning's light
Died in thy want as in a sepulchre.

All, all things thou did'st need, because thou wert
The neediest heart that trod these highways yet,
Lopped from all chances and kept close, inert,
By the dark tie within thy brain long set

That must thee hinder from each earthly love,
Each warm and tender margin that might touch
Another's life. Thou thought'st thyself above,
Who wert below, and now hast but a crutch

Of desperate sleep to lean on, so that thou
Can'st shut the thronging camp out evermore,
But, fearing still an echo in thy brow
Arise, take opiates, lock a darker door.

26th November 1971
On an old woman sleeping in hospital

Within this carven ear, shut eye,
I see the hurrying world go by.

In this old shrunken thing is dressed
Man's first dream and his lastliest.

So at the sleeper's side I write
Figures and canticles of light,

And spy and smile upon her ease—
Tell-tale of all her mysteries.

The sun's beam moves, as still I guess
Who answers 'No' and who says 'Yes,'

And in which turret thought must stay
To search and visit in our day

Out of the marches of the light,
Beyond the lands and keeps of night.

Hours crawl like blindworms as I dream
Who wrought that work, that sense, that theme.

O who, and who, and who must sleep
In the steep artery and deep

Mysterious calyx of her brain
Upon some noon to rise again,

And walk, eyes downcast, in our world,
Sombre and strange, a thought half-furled,

To turn, entranced, to his own
Still house, where all flowers are unblown.

O thou unborn, who never quite
Say 'Yes' to day and 'No' to night

Thou loveliest guest of all I see
In this old woman's mystery.
The Halcyons

How Ceyx, son of Lucifer, and his wife Alcyone*, daughter of Aeolus, were changed into birds.

(Ovid, Metamorphosis XI)

I

Gently the waves
   On winter seas
Dandle the nest
   Through the calm solstice.

While storms menace
   A smooth dark space
Opens on furrows
   That dip and arise.

But by what sorrows
   Such peace was won
Is the bird's secret,
   The bright halcyon.

II

'Not over the seas, my love, do not set sail over sea,
For the winds are pitiless; I heard them in my childhood
Howling through my father's caves. If you must go
Let the journey be over land.' So Alcyone begged,
But gentle Ceyx, son of the morning star, would not listen,
Dearly though he loved her: disasters and portents,
A brother's fearful fate, robbed him of his rest:
He must consult the oracle, peregrine over seas
To understand the meaning, discover the remedy.
'At least take me with you, or I shall believe
I am dearer to you absent,' Alcyone said smiling.
'It is the loss of you, not suffering, I fear.
All is joy, if shared with you.'

* Pronounced to rhyme with Hermione
'Then send your heart with me, 
And keep your body, that I worship, safe for me on land. 
I swear I shall return.'

Foreboding on the shore
She waves good-bye. The oars are double-banked, the hoisted sail 
Soon drops below the horizon. Then begin the counted hours, 
The empty days; the only solace picturing 
His dear return, his arms around her – that and a faithful prayer 
Each day to Juno; incense burnt, and candles lit. 
But while she prays, a storm has caught his ship; mountainous waves 
Crash on the deck, the mast is gone, oars and rudder smashed, 
The captain's frantic shout unheard in the howling of the wind. 
The ship shudders: now a hulk she lifts to a dizzy height 
Then plunges sideways; all are lost in the writhing boiling water, 
And Ceyx in the sea's throat calls out your name, Alcyone.

Even the pagan gods are not so heartless as we think them: 
Hopeful prayers, where no hope can be, disturb the Olympian peace. 
So, that Alcyone may know the truth in a true dream, 
Juno summons from the cave of dreams Morpheus the son of Sleep 
Who can assume all human forms.

Into her sleep he came 
As from the sea, the water streaming from his hair and beard, 
He seemed alive, as visions do, and yet she knew him dead. 
'Precious Alcyone, your tears are all you owe me now, 
For I am drowned. Your prayers could not turn aside the storm, 
Nor pacify the hungry seas. While I could I called your name 
Until the waters closed over my head.'

She sprang to clasp him – 
Poor naked ghost – embraced the air, and crying 'Take me with you, 
I cannot live,' ran to the shore, as though the sea that stole him 
Might hold him still . . .

So far the story might be yours or mine: 
Parting, death, and a revenant in dream. But this is fable, 
So it is winged beyond our common skill to master fate.

As dawn broke she gazed over the dreary rolling waters 
And saw far out a shape – was it a boat, was it a corpse? 
Nearer and nearer it came, and as a wave lifted it high 
She knew her husband's face, and knew that he fulfilled 
His promise to return. At once, frantic to reach him 
She ran to the little jetty, leapt, flew into the sea.
Changing as she flew, she uttered harsh sounds,
And reached him, a bird. The kisses of that bird’s beak
Renewed his spark of life; intensity of longing
Drew him alive to share her nature.

So the life they share
Is not the life they lost; yet, always together,
They mate and rear their young. In the winter solstice
Her father Aeolus locks up the winds;
While she broods, men call it the kingfisher weather.

III

When misery is greatest
Souls take wing,
Feathered by desire
    Or despair, rejecting
Intolerable fact,
    Take flight into madness
Or die by their own act.

Away into the sky
    From the squalor of Milan
The luckless children fly
    In de Sica’s film,
As though to affirm
That there is no solution
    For life’s cruelty,
Only to fly away.

But something more is meant
    By those myths of bird-changes,
That love continues blest
    In different guises;
That immortality
    Is not mere repetition:
It is a blue flash,
    A kingfisher vision.
It is a new-feathered
    And procreant love,
Seen where the halcyon
    Nests on the wave.
GREVEL LINDOP

The Project for a New Linguistics

It will listen to the voice of the rose crying, to the stone's solitary vowel.

It will be founded in the experience of the diligent girl from whose lips fell pearls and rubies; of her lazy sister who found herself uttering adders and toads.

It will attend to the Tibetan sacred books whose syllables murmur themselves perpetually as they rest on the shelves wrapped in their rainbow silks.

It will have time for the child's first pun; for the old man's explanation of his life.

It will trace the calligraphy of swifts and note the pitches of their call.

It will eat the white snake.

First and last it will know one thing, that poetry is plain speaking.

From a Flat City

Sometimes from the top deck of a bus or the apogee of the Big Wheel at a fairground you suddenly see them, like a pencil-smudge or a brush-stroke of blue ink over the stacked concrete blocks of the Hulme estate and the meat-pink brick of the cavernous textile-mills at Reddish, and say, 'the hills!' as if they were paying a rare, auspicious visit. Not the prisoner's square of sky is what we crave: we've that already, a luminous, entrancing sky that hangs its clouds above us, delicate and massive,
like a woman leaning over a sleepy lover.
It's earth we long for—earth heaped up like clouds,
drifted like smoke, smeared like approaching rain,
combed into escarpments or piled with forest.
Our imagination dwells in hills, but the plain
and the industrial haze deny them: it's
an achievement if you can make out Beeston Hill
from the eighteenth floor of the University Maths Tower.
Yet one morning, from my daughter's bedroom window,
between the shoulders of two redtiled roofs
I caught sight of a neat triangular peak
distinct from the clouds, apparently grassgrown, the sunlight
just dusting one edge. I had half a mind
(but that such accuracy is beyond me)
to take a compass-bearing, find a map,
identify the hill and one clear day
climb it with binoculars to sift
that window like a grain of glittering quartz
out of the city blur, and maybe see her
run to the glass and stare unseeing back
towards the hills she doesn't know are there.

JAMES McGONIGAL

Stabat Mater

Sharp strokes of rain

on a tree trunk.

Climbing the hill where gentians blow
I have stepped from the wood to the clouds.

Now a redbreast sings a soft treble
from the beech, bloody in leaf.
I had a mother 
who buttoned my coat against the wind 

and watched me go. Seagulls 
ascending across the sun, birds of passage 
in their enormous world, 
have gone, each one 
a handkerchief, that wiped a face 
and flew away.

Fourth World Devotionals

1.
Look in the corner: footprints, a bottle kicked aside 
rolls back. Food chewed and swallowed in the judgment hall – 
bones thrown to dogs. Feel our inferno. Redbreasted men 
rake fires, stoke heat and stare till flames din 
extraordinary battles in the air. Long days, short days 
each with nothing in them. The old folk push through cold 
a hobbled step step up the icy street 
to come where rich light paints the crumbling walls.

2.
The dead, our dead, reproachless under hail: no inter-
active video calls their name, their lid's no dish for signs. 
Where but this hill fort lit by snow candles 
could we slide down into earth’s arms as well? 
Ice on the walkways, slushing in underpasses. Breath, 
held, exhaled a bitter foam in air that touched
bare walls then streamed in shapes of prayers. Who saw the enemy we sheltered from? Tonight only the beat of hearts keeps watchmen to the hour. Our stone orb split—

the piece of bread a hungry sparrow shakes releasing crumbs of light on wintry air.

3.

‘Who swept the synagogue when Jesus left?’ That dust hoarded its mica, spittle, curses. Splintered from earth, grassblades shake alone. One song, face upwards, reaches old men washing the whole place white from roof to street. O battered cloud, peering at evening through streaked windows, watchman with a cautious torch, pray for tribes locked in frost.
Friedrich von Hardenberg-Novalis
A Portrait

CHRISTOPHER BAMFORD

'I = not-I. This is the highest principle of all science, and all art.'

'Actually, we are all identical — and only from this point of view does each identity divide. "I" is the absolute communal place — the nexus.'

Georg Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg was born on 2nd May 1772, in Oberwiederstedt in Lower Saxony. Short in duration, Hardenberg's life was infinite in depth. Dead at twenty-nine, he left behind him, under his pen name of Novalis, a body of work of such poetic radiance, pure religious feeling, and philosophical depth, that only now, two centuries later, are we able to hear his voice and comprehend the peculiar confluence of poetry, philosophy and religion embodied in his being and communicated in his text.

The name of Novalis Hardenberg took from the Latin for 'newly ploughed fields,' placing his work under the sign of the opening of a new era. That 'Novalis' or von Rode (from 'roden,' to clear land as with a mattock; to break new ground) was also a family name on his mother's side (von Hardenbergs had already called themselves 'von Rode' or 'de Novali' in the thirteenth century) could only confirm this sense of mission, of being one called 'to cultivate the earth,' to baptize and humanize it by love raised to the highest power: the productive or creative imagination.

Novalis thus presents himself as a prophet and example of human possibility. Sometimes this possibility seems so different from our present state, so pure and angelic, so transparent and lacking in personality in the lower sense, that we hardly believe it to be human. Yet none was more human than he; and this too makes him elusive and terrifying. For the beauty of this poet is the beauty Rilke spoke of, which we can only just begin to bear. But rather than he, it is we who are hardly human, not fully real. Hardenberg dedicated his life to the art of
becoming human; for him there was no other art. Becoming human, he became ‘Novalis.’

To explore the mystery of this transformation is the purpose of this paper.

Hardenberg was born the first of eleven children, only one of whom outlived their mother. His father, Heinrich Ulrich Erasmus, was austere, ascetic, conservative – a good man, but a cold father.

Auguste Berhardine’s gentle, motherly nature balanced her husband’s dogmatic severity. Yet life was not easy in that cold, dark thirteenth century convent. A mother’s love could do little to assuage the essential dryness of a life that revolved around daily prayer and Bible study.

Until his ninth year, young Friedrich was dreamy and backward-seeming, slow to learn, of delicate health. Then, in 1780, a great change occurred. A severe bout of dysentery was followed by an atonie of the stomach. Parents and physicians expected the worst. It did not come. On the contrary, illness proved a blessing: Friedrich’s recovery was accompanied by a remarkable mental awakening. Above all, his spirit began to show, independent and high-minded, not about to accept passively and without thinking any authority or tradition.

With this change, Erasmus was forced to take a greater interest in this son, who now began to question everything. Fearful above all for his son’s faith, Erasmus turned to the Moravian brotherhood of Neudietendorf; but in that environment a free spirit could find no asylum. Friedrich found the religiosity intolerable. He refused to stay on until his confirmation. Not knowing what to do, and harried by events at home, Erasmus turned for help to his brother, Friedrich Wilhelm, a Lord of the German Order of Knighthood, a man both of the world and of the Enlightenment, a sceptical rationalist, highly cultured, principled, and urbane. Sent to his uncle at Lucklum, the eleven year old Hardenberg discovered the conversation and culture with which Pietism had been unable to come to terms: Goethe, Wieland, Lessing, Shakespeare, the French Encyclopedists. Here also he learned a worldlier ambition – that of being a poet.

With his twelfth year came yet another decisive turn. In December, 1784, his father was appointed supervisor of the salt works at Weissenfels, a pleasant little town on the river Saale about twenty miles
from Leipsig. Here, though family life was no less austere, there were neighbours and friends, even a certain warmth. Here in Saxony and Thuringia (now East Germany), Hardenberg's destiny played out. Here too he wrote his first verses, developed his deep affection for classical letters (he asked a friend to send him the works of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Theocritus, amongst others) and for poetry (Young's 'Night Thoughts' in German translation) and fairy tales.

He was very industrious in his studies (wrote his brother) and already knew Latin and Greek with a certain fluency by his twelfth year; there are also several poems from this period. In his leisure hours his favourite reading was poems and tales, which last he also loved to tell his sisters. It is also of interest that, under Friedrich’s direction, the three brothers were in the habit of playing the following game: each was assigned a spirit – the spirit of the sky, the water, or the earth – and each Sunday Friedrich would recount the latest events that had occurred in their respective realms which he knew how to unfold in the most graceful and varied manner . . .

In the Spring of 1790, inwardly committed to a 'poetic life' – he had already made contact with the literary world and written poems about Orpheus with whom he was to have a lifelong identification – Friedrich von Hardenberg left his home in Weissenfels to complete his education at the Lutheran Gymnasium in Eisleben.

In the Autumn of the same year (1790), he entered the University of Jena to study Law. Here he fell under the genius and tutelage of Schiller, whose work as a poet and dramatist he already knew. But the man who faced him now was a philosopher and a historian, at a turning-point in his life, about to enter the three year study of Kant's philosophy that would culminate in the masterly *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Hardenberg's meeting with him was providential – 'His first look threw me into the dust and raised me up again' – demonstrating as it did the revolutionary, life-transforming role of the marriage of poetry and philosophy on the path to self-knowledge.

The meeting with Schiller was initiatory; Hardenberg now stood on the world stage. He saw in Schiller ‘one of those rare men to whom the gods have revealed face to face the high secret that beauty and truth are one and the same Goddess . . . I recognize him (he wrote to Reinhold, his teacher in Kantian philosophy) for the lofty genius who hovers over the centuries . . . the teacher of the centuries to come . . . a citizen of the world whose heart beats for more than mankind.'
These were revolutionary years: the French Revolution was the context and provided the axiomatic, if implicit, starting-point of all discussion. As for the connection between Kantian philosophy and the era inaugurated in Paris in 1789, it may be found in the universal concern for the meaning and reality of human freedom. To find and realize a conception of man as a free, perfectable being in whom love and imagination conjoin in spontaneous creativity was the task of the age.

Such reverberations were felt across Europe, forming the creative ferment, the revolution, called Romanticism. The challenge, and the promise, thrown down by Kant is what binds together destinies as disparate as Goethe, Coleridge, Hegel, Biely, and of course Novalis (and Novalis' teacher, Fichte, who wrote 'I am living in a new world'). After Kant, the world had to be made anew, and even those who knew nothing of the philosopher, like Blake and Keats, recognised the chief task of the age to be the overcoming of that false duality of subject and object, consciousness and nature, under the illusion of which the world (and hence the soul) is torn apart.

Following his year at Jena, Hardenberg, still determined on a career in law, enrolled at the University of Leipsig. But some things cannot be planned. Soon after arriving he must have met Friedrich Schlegel, for the latter wrote to his brother, August Wilhelm, in January:

Destiny has placed in my hands a young man of whom everything may be expected. He pleased me greatly and I went out of my way to meet him. Soon he opened the sanctuary of his heart to me. I have now taken my seat there and cast about for good things. He is still a very young man – of slender good looks, a fine face with dark eyes, and a charming expression when he speaks with fire of something beautiful – with unbelievable fire – he speaks three times more and three times faster than the rest of us. He has the swiftest powers of comprehension and receptivity. The study of philosophy has given him great agility in the unfolding of beautiful, philosophical thoughts – he follows not the true, but the beautiful. His favourite authors are Plato and Hemsterhuis. On one of our first evenings he developed with tremendous, fiery zeal his opinion that evil did not exist in the world and that all things were drawing near again to the Golden Age. Never have I seen youth's brilliance so clearly. His perceptions have a certain chastity that has its ground in the soul and not in lack of experience. For he has already been much in society – in Jena – where he knew everyone, among them the finest spirits and philosophers, above all Schiller . . .
Schlegel, to whom Hardenberg showed his first poems, undertook to tame and tutor ‘in all the arts of companionability’ his new friend who seemed like a wild creature, ‘ever full of energetic, restless joy.’ Sceptical, ironic, sentimental, Schlegel tested Hardenberg’s deep-seated piety, his sense of devotion, thereby strengthening his innate interiority, his unique depth. The relationship was marked by crisis, tension, vacillation as Schlegel led the way from the Apollonian Greece of Schiller’s ‘Gods of Greece’ to the more Dionysian, nocturnal, ecstatic world of Hellas. ‘You have been the high priest of Eleusis for me. Through you I have come to know heaven and hell – through you I have tasted of the tree of knowledge,’ wrote Hardenberg, and Schlegel replied: ‘You are a prophet – become now and evermore a man . . .’ At the same time, girls’ names begin to appear in verses and letters. It is an old story, soon to be followed by debts and a family quarrel.

In desperation, Hardenberg decided to become a soldier. The idea of course came to nothing. Hardenberg returned to Weissenfels and, in April 1793, enrolled at the University of Wittenberg. Kant, Schiller and the Greeks took their places against a background dominated by Luther and ecclesiastical history. He graduated in June 1794, and returned to Weissenfels to await the call of destiny.

Appointed a law clerk, Hardenberg moved to Tennstedt in north Thuringia, where he was to work and live with District Judge Coelestin August Just, a man renowned for his knowledge and culture, who lived with his niece, Caroline. Just was Hardenberg’s first biographer; as such, he confessed, ‘I was supposed to be his teacher and leader, but he was my teacher . . .’ For him, Hardenberg was the first human being of whom it could be said, not that he had genius, but that he was genius. He wrote that Hardenberg freed him ‘from the fetters of one-sidedness to which a longtime businessman can so easily become fixed.’

On November 17, Hardenberg set out with Just and his niece on ‘an expedition’ to collect taxes. Thus, without warning, in the midst of the unaffected simplicity of a country family, Hardenberg met his destiny: Sophie von Kuhn. It was a superhuman meeting. That she was only twelve years old at the time made no difference. ‘In a quarter of an hour my mind was made up,’ he wrote to his brother Erasmus, explaining in a poem:

It cannot be drunkenness – or I was not born for this star . . .
On the contrary: this vision of ‘moral grace’ occurred in ‘full conscious-
ness.’ If it was intoxication, what then was life? ‘Sobriety’ was the form
of the experience, hope its content:

One day humanity will be what Sophie is to me now – perfect moral grace.
Then higher consciousness will be confused no more with the fog of too
much wine.

Three years earlier, Hardenberg had noted presciently in a letter to
Schiller: ‘(Moral beauty) lifts us above ourselves.... If I could only
unite this love for moral beauty and grace into the purest, noblest
passion which has ever permeated a mortal bosom with its fiery glow!’

As Henry Corbin points out in his study of the dialectic of love in Ibn
Arabi, ‘a being does not truly love anyone other than his Creator.’ But if
this is the secret of the real Beloved, who in reality is the Lover? These
are mysteries we cannot approach without circumspection. We can
only begin to guess (still following Corbin) that we have to do not with
two heterogenous beings, but with a single being, an ‘ unus-ambo’ or
bi-unity, at once two and one. Love in this sense is that single being, the
way to the other world: an eternal exchange between God and
creature, between heaven and earth, perfect nature and the human
being.

Now Hardenberg could begin to say:

My favourite study has the same name as my bride. Her name is Sophie.
Philosophy is my life’s soul and the key to my true self. Since my friendship
with Sophie I am bound to this study.

From this moment on, Grueningen is the sacred omphalos, the
imaginal place of revelation, ecstasy, transformation. It is paradise;
Hardenberg dates letters from there ‘Elysium.’

A temple – wherein we kneel,
A place – whither we draw near,
A joy – for which we burn
A heaven – I and thou.

On Sophie’s thirteenth birthday, March 15, 1795, she and Friedrich
plighted their troth. Who was she? She was to Hardenberg what
Beatrice was to Dante: a being (to use Henry Corbin’s language)
apprehended directly by the Imagination and so transfigured into a
symbol thanks to a theophanic light; a real woman (or girl) transfigured
by a celestial aura; a divine archetypal figure contemplated in a concrete
form.
Yet, and here is the mystery, Sophie was also a very real adolescent girl. Hardenberg described her in his diary:

Klarissa. Her precocity. She wishes to please all. Her obedience, her respect for her father. Her decency, her innocent trustfulness. Her obstinacy of feeling, her malleability before others, whom she either treasures or fears . . .

The list continues: her capriciousness; her gentleness; the fact that she does not want to be anything, but is something; her musical nature, her love of dance; her natural sense of religion, her free joie de vivre; her openness, her lack of reflection; her fear of marriage; her orderliness; her talent for imitation, pretence, secrecy; her generosity . . .

Yet perhaps not so strange a mixture when we recall she is only thirteen. No wonder that she does not seem to have reached the age of reflection, nor to have any understanding of poetry. In so many ways she is still a child: that Hardenberg declared himself so soon irks her. She does not like it that he is so open; she does not wish to be burdened by his love. Often his love weighs upon her. Generally, she is cold. Yet she requests locks of his hair and quite clearly is devoted to him.

In November 1795, seven months after the secret engagement, Sophie fell seriously ill ‘of a fever with pains in the side.’ The fever left, but not the pain. Five months later, with Sophie barely recovered, on her fourteenth birthday, the engagement was made public. In July, Sophie fell ill again, more seriously still. Following an operation in Jena, she lay for weeks within the shadow of death. Goethe visited her sickbed and was moved by her transparent purity. Had he not been so moved, Hardenberg remarked later, he would have lost all respect for him as a connoisseur of beauty or knower of truth and goodness. Thus Hardenberg’s first love gradually flamed into an ecstasy.

In December, Sophie returned to Grueningen, Hardenberg remaining in constant attendance. Four days before her fifteenth birthday, Sophie asked him to leave; eight days later, she was dead. She had died with perfect maturity, beauty, grace and peace. So spiritually concentrated was she in her agony that, it is said, Hardenberg saw her immortal being shining out, hard and bright, like a diamond. To this being he vowed himself eternally. Sophie’s death became the key to life, the revelation of a higher life — death-in-life — the promise of a higher birth or resurrection. From this moment on, death and life moved into inextricable proximity. Only love could make them one. Hardenberg
was twenty-five, the same age as Dante when Beatrice Portinari died. He recognized his destiny:

   Whoever flees pain
   will love no more.
   To love is always
   to feel the opening,
   to hold the wound
   always open.

Transformation was his only prayer and hope.

'Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and towards your inner life; this is the first demand that philosophy makes of its disciple. Our concern is not with anything that lies outside you, but only with yourself.' This invitation to the inner life begins the First Introduction to Fichte's 'Science of Knowledge', Hardenberg's chief bedside book during these 'Sophianic' years. This work provides a philosophical directive for life, or rather, a directive for the philosophical life. To seek the ground of all experience the student is led on a rigorous course of training in the observation of consciousness or what Coleridge called 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking'.

All of this is summed up in the central Fichtean experience of the 'I' or self. If we wish to start, to found our philosophy, not in the world but in intelligence or mind, then we must assume the existence of a higher, unfallen self or transcendental I, the source of both the lower self (or empirical I) and the world. The first task on the Fichtean path is to realize, by intellectual intuition, the activity of this transcendent self—in traditional language, the philosopher's angel or the witness in heaven—as the active principle in consciousness.

Such intuitive participation in the transcendent I can be demonstrated neither logically nor conceptually: it can only be experienced. The object of the Fichtean quest cannot be known; it is knowing itself. Lived, it is life. It cannot be objectified; it is pure activity or self-enactment, in which there is no longer any foreign element to create a difference between enactment and accomplishment. 'For idealism the intelligence is a doing and absolutely nothing else.' This doing is the seeing referred to in the Eckhartian formula: 'The seeing through
which I know him is the same seeing through which he knows me.’ Every act of objectification, each thing in the world, presupposes and confirms the action of this seeing doing which is the transcendent self.

All activity, everything, derives from, and must be ascribed to, the transcendent self, the I of one’s I: this is the source and end of becoming human, the goal of human activity. Reality in this state is non-dual, without subject and object. Subject and object, the division of the I into consciousness and nature, exist only for the empirical consciousness of the divisible I. Beyond empirical consciousness lies some fundamental creative power, which Fichte, like so many others, calls the productive power of the imagination, the power of productive imagination. Imagination is the mediatrix, the interworld between the transcendent self and the phenomenal, paradoxical dualized world with its ordinary I and not-I. As such, it is everywhere at work. Distilled, this means, as Novalis later wrote:

‘It is bad that poetry has a special name and that the poet represents a profession apart. Poetry is not anything special in itself. It is but the mode of activity proper to the human spirit. Are not the imaginations of man’s heart at work every minute . . .?’

More than that, insofar as it can be known by its effects, we can say that the imagination, which is the pure enactment of being, is the true self, the point-activity beyond subject and object which is the creative ground of both.

In the Autumn of 1795 Hardenberg began his Fichte notebooks, working at these problems:

The proposition ‘a is a’ contains only a positing, a distinguishing, and binding together. In order to make ‘a’ clearer, A is divided. ‘Is’ becomes the general content, ‘a’ the given form. The essence of identity can be established only apparently. In order to represent it we must leave it behind . . .

Application of the above to the phrase:

‘I am I.’

What is I? Absolute thetic power. The sphere of the I must include all else for us. Only as its own content can the I know content. Knowing points to its I-being . . .’

Similar remarks follow, as Hardenberg moves on to consider consciousness and knowledge:
Consciousness is a being outside being in being.
But what is that?
Something outside being cannot be true being.
Untrue being outside being is an image.
Therefore whatever is outside being must be an image of being in being.
Consciousness is thus an image of being in being.
Need to clarify images./ Signs./ Theory of signs . . .

From this it follows that ‘The I has a hieroglyphic power.’ The world is made of images. It is a continuous imagination or dream.

But Hardenberg is not a philosopher like Fichte; he is a poet whose temperament is religious. His concern therefore is not with Fichte’s ‘not-I’ but with ‘thou’, a thou which opens up to frame the entire world.

Two fragments from the Notebooks sum up this move:

Instead of not-I – thou.
Spinoza reached to nature – Fichte to the I, or Person. I to the thesis, God.

Such is the precondition for the realization of the imagination, the true poetic – demiurgic or creative – power. For it is the same imagination that unites as divides: the same I. ‘Dividing <separating> and uniting. The pure and the empirical I.’ ‘The imagination is the binding mean term <logos> – the synthesis – the power of exchange.’ To live there, at the mid-point between inner and outer, spirit and nature, is Hardenberg’s aim.

Hardenberg spent the year-and-a-half that began in the Autumn of 1795 and ended with Sophie’s death in early Spring, 1797, wrestling with these Fichtean dilemmas – not as matters of speculation but as spiritual exercises. To understand what this means we need only recall the painful, heart-rending circumstances in which he lived. To strive to detach himself while yet remaining faithful with every fibre of his being, at a time when everything seemed intent on fastening its tentacles upon him and rendering love impossible, must have required superhuman effort. But Hardenberg had no choice. Every available moment he sought to experience the realities that Fichte had described. It was for him a question of vocation, in the religious sense. It was necessary to realize the transcendent I as Fichte spoke of it, to live in the full power of the productive imagination, in order ‘to become a perfected human being – a person’, a free, moral agent. He wrote in his notebooks:
Morality is the core of our being—when morality is what it ought to be. The ideal of being must be the aim and origin of all morality. An unending realization of being should be the vocation of the I: its striving always to have increase of being. From the I am evil lessens and good increases. The highest philosophy is ethics. All philosophy of the I begins in ethics . . .

Thus, in Hardenberg, what is now called phenomenology of consciousness—a precise self-observation—was accompanied by a continuous moral striving to become the I of one’s I. What is even more astonishing is that the place where this happens, where the ethical and the philosophical come together, he named now imagination, now person, meaning by the latter the essential being: the person in the heart.

At the same time, of course, life had to be lived, trips taken, work accomplished. Hardenberg even (in 1795–6) changed jobs, becoming the assessor of salt mines under his father, which meant both a return to Weissenfels and intense scientific studies in geology, chemistry, halurgy. No wonder then that in between philosophical entries we find admonitions like: ‘Exercise patience’; and ‘Equanimity— even in the most hopeless cases. E.g. in the case of Sophie.’ And that in a page of fragments originating around the moment of her death we find:

I have religion for Sophie—not love. Absolute love, independent of the heart, grounded in faith, is religion.

Absolute will can transform love into religion . . .

The mixture of will and striving for knowledge is faith.

And finally:

Perhaps the fault, because of which I attain no further, lies somewhat in this— that I cannot grasp and hold a whole.

With the death of Sophie von Kuhn, Hardenberg’s final initiation was about to begin. On March 22, three days after her death, he wrote this ‘Lamentation for the Dead’:

It grew dark
about me
while I still saw
dawn’s red blush.
My sadness is boundless
as my love.
For three years
she was
my hourly thought.
Only she
bound me to life,
to the land,
to my occupation.
With her I was
cut off from all,
for even myself
I possessed almost no more.

But evening
fell, and I felt
as if I had gone
away too soon.

Death surrounded him. It became his reason for living: a form of his bride. A month after Sophie’s death, on April 14, his brother Erasmus died. Hardenberg vowed to follow Sophie, to remain faithful to her and love her beyond time and the tomb. His faith would not allow life to divide them. On April 18 he began a journal, dating it: Day 31. It is a remarkable document. Extracts follow, for there is no substitute for the actual tone, in the narration of which the mystery of the transformation of Friedrich von Hardenberg into Novalis is accomplished:

Day 31: ‘Sensual stirrings early this morning. Many thoughts about She and I. Philosophy. Passably cheerful and bright. The object of my thoughts reasonably firm. . . .’


Day 33: ‘Thought much about Sophie today. Felt unwell on rising – a little improved towards midday . . .’ Day 34: ‘Sensual imaginings first thing in the morning. Then suitably philosophical . . . I thought of Sophie, but without intimacy or fervour; of Erasmus my thoughts were cold.’ Day 35: ‘Nothing.’ Day 36: ‘I wrote well. After lunch, coffee in the garden; for once felt a true calm in me.’ Day 37: ‘My head not exactly clear – and yet, early on, I did have an hour of bliss. My imagination was perhaps a little voluptuous – yet today I felt rather good. In the afternoon my head was clear. “Wilhelm Meister” occupied me all day. My love for Sophie appeared to me under a new light. In the evening I spoke openly – yet in between I
thought much of my resolution. I hold to my determination courageously. Sophie will make it go ever better. I must only live in her more and more. Only in the thought of her am I truly well.' Day 38: 'Manly and well today . . . Thought much of Sophie – freely and bravely . . . In the evening, a lively impression of her death . . .'

Verse jottings give a more pointed emotional tone:

The petal
has now wafted over
to the other world –
The player in desperation throws the cards from his hand and smiles as if waking from a dream . . .

* The more uneasy the dreams
the nearer
the quickening dawn
* My love has grown
to a flame
that has consumed
everything earthly.
* She is dead –
I die likewise –
desolate is the world.
* Who shuts her out
shuts me out.

Returning to the journal:

Day 39: 'On the whole I can be happy – true, I have not thought of her with deep feeling – I have been almost jolly – but in a certain way I have not been unworthy of her – I have thought of her sometimes in a manly way . . . My resolution holds firm . . .' Day 40: ' . . . I must treat myself in a more manly fashion – must trust myself – I must not be childishly fainthearted and act weakly and spoil myself. I must learn to bear pain and sadness better.' Day 42: ' . . . Leafed through some old achemical pages after lunch.' Day 43: ' . . . Rained continuously. Wept much in the morning and again after lunch. The whole day completely sanctified in her memory . . . Very moved – went to her tomb to plant flowers . . . ' Day 47: ' . . . Now I seem rather cold and too much in the everyday mode. Let me strive only for higher, permanent reflections and their mood. O how little I can dwell in the heights!' Day 48: ' . . . Before my eyes I beheld the living image of my
Sophie — “in profile” on the couch beside me — in her green shawl — it is always in characteristic situations and clothes that I see her most easily. In the evening, in a general way, I thought of her intimately, truly, deeply. I have good reason today to be happy with everything. Up to now God has guided me with love — He will continue to do so.' Day 49: 'I can be satisfied with my fidelity and my devotion. But I did not go to bed as happy as yesterday: I was agitated, anxious.'

Day 50: 'I was not much together with Sophie in my thoughts today — but occasionally was so, intensely and with fervour, especially in church.' Day 51: 'The weather was magnificent — a living memory of her — then I walked a little — picked flowers and laid them on her grave. I felt well — if a little cold — yet I wept — The evening was beautiful — I sat by her grave for a time . . . In the morning my resolution was distant, in the evening it was close.' Day 54: 'Philosophical in the morning . . . I gathered flowers — laid them on her tomb — I felt close to her — during this half-hour I was very happy, serene — animated by her memory.' Day 55: 'Lust stirred from early morning till midday . . . On the tomb of my beloved — stayed there until 7 o'clock — in a state of true closeness, without weeping . . .'

Day 56 (May 13): 'I rose early at five. The weather was good. The morning passed without my doing much. Captain Rockenthien came with his sister-in-law and the children. I received a letter from Schlegel, with the first part of the new translation of Shakespeare. After lunch a walk — then returned for coffee — the weather changed, first a storm, then cloudy and tormented — full of desire — I set to reading Shakespeare — continued engrossed. In the evening I went to Sophie. There I was indescribably happy — moments of dazzling enthusiasm — I blew the grave aside like dust — The centuries were like moments — Her nearness was palpable — I believed she would always come forward before me . . . In the evening I had a few good ideas. Shakespeare gave me much to think about.'

In this entry lies of course the germ of the Third Hymn, the earliest, of ‘The Hymns to the Night’. Different influences on this seminal experience have been proposed — Herder, Schleiermacher, Jean Paul — but as it stands in the context of the journal it is the framing of the event by Shakespeare that is the most remarkable. The volume which Hardenberg received from Schlegel contained, amongst other plays, ‘Romeo and Juliet’. Hardenberg was resolved to join his Sophie in death. Clearly ‘Romeo and Juliet’ would strike a responsive note. In his note accompanying the return of the volume (May 25), Hardenberg wrote:

I am beginning to suspect what makes Shakespeare so unique. He has been allowed to develop divinatory structures. The contrasts did not disturb me
as they used to – I enjoyed the piece just as it was. Much of what I experienced I cannot yet express. The structure is magnificent – With what expiatory sacrifice the old feud ends – The wild hate is undone in consuming love.

Returning again to the journal:

Days 57–58: ‘... Much lasciviousness ... In the evening, I went to the tomb and enjoyed moments of wild joy ...’ Day 59: ‘I went into the portrait room (the room much loved by Sophie) – I opened the cupboard and stood gazing at my Sophie’s things – reading my letters and her correspondence in general. Afterwards, I was completely close to her. Then I went downstairs to walk in the garden. Went to get a glass of milk and took Ferguson’s “Moral Philosophy”, and went to the cemetery, where I read Ferguson and drank my milk ... My resolution took on a new vigour – a new firmness.’ Days 60–61: ‘Thought joyfully of my resolution, full of happiness – thinking of Sophie a great deal. On her tomb, passably fervent ... I must live more and more in her will – I am now only for her – not for myself, nor for anyone else. She is the height – the only one – My chief task must be: to bring everything into connection with the idea of her.’ Day 62: ‘The idea came to me at her grave – that by my death I would provide humanity with faithfulness unto death – that in some sort I would make possible a like love for her.’

Day 63: ‘Without her there is nothing in the world for me – Actually I should give nothing else any value.’ Day 64: ‘Reread some Fichte extracts in the morning – Some stirrings of desire ... Inwardly very active, walking endlessly in the corridor ... Then I went to the tomb, where I reflected much and experienced an ineffable peace.’ Day 65: ‘In the measure that the sensible pain diminishes, the stronger the spiritual sadness grows, the higher ascends a kind of peaceful despair. The world grows ever stranger – things around me ever more indifferent – And proportionately all grows brighter in and around me. With regard to my resolution, I must only not begin to rationalize – every reasoned motivation, each speculation on the heart’s reasons is already doubt, hesitation, infidelity.’ Day 66: ‘As to the resolution, I must no longer reason about it – and as I seek to think certain thoughts so also I should strive to voluntarily arouse in myself by certain means specific moods ...’ Day 68: ‘I must absolutely seek, learn to affirm my I as best I can through life’s vicissitudes and emotional transformations – Unceasingly to think of myself, and what I am experiencing and doing.’ Day 69: ‘Fichte ... Thought of S. assiduously – and above all it became clear to me neither the most beautiful scientific visions nor anything else should retain me on earth. My death will be the confirmation of my feeling for what is highest, an authentic sacrifice – not a flight – not an act of
I also noted that it is manifestly my destiny — that there is nothing here for me to attain — that I must separate myself from all . . .

Days 72–73: ‘Between the turnpike and Grueningen I had the joy of discovering the true Fichtean concept of the I.’ This moment of enlightenment, so long awaited, occurred as if design on the same spot from which Hardenberg first glimpsed the house where his meeting with Sophie was about to take place.

Day 80: ‘Who flees pain no longer wishes to love. The lover must feel the gap eternally, must hold the wound always open. May God ever maintain in me this indescribably beloved pain — this sadness and memory — this brave longing — this manly resolution and faith strong as a rock. Without my Sophie I am nothing; with her, everything.’

Day 83: ‘Today I found the sole good — the idea of unspeakable solitude — that has surrounded me since Sophie’s death — with her the whole world died for me. Since then, I no longer belong here.’ Day 87: ‘She is dead — hence I die also — the world is waste. Even my philosophical studies should no longer detain me. In deep, calm peace I await the moment that calls me.’ Day 88: ‘Who excludes her, excludes me. Our betrothal was not for this world. I shall not be perfected here . . .’

Days 90–103 (Weissenfels, 16–29 June): ‘To have perpetually before my eyes my darling little Sophie . . . Christ and Sophie.’

Finally, in the margin, written sometime in early summer:

A union concluded also for death, these are the nuptials that give us a companion for the night. Love is sweetest in death; death is a wedding night for one who loves; a most sweet secret of the mysteries.

Is it not wise to seek a hospitable resting place for the night? Therefore he is well-advised — who loves his sleeping one.

The twilight of evening is always a melancholic hour, as that of morning is a joyful one, full of expectation.

Here, for the first time, we hear the authentic voice of Novalis. A turn had been made. He wrote to Wolffmann:

My powers have waxed rather than waned. I often feel now that it is meet that it is so. I am wholly content. I have gained anew the power that rises above death. My being has taken on unity and form. Even now a new inner life is growing within me.’

Though, in a sense, the practical function of a pseudonym is to eschew biography, the bearer continues to have a life and a history.
Materials for the life of von Hardenberg abound. Yet the problem still exists, for the biography of Hardenberg and the phenomenon of Novalis exist in different, though related, universes, just as do, in a precisely correspondent manner, the empirical I and the transcendent I.

Already in the period immediately following Sophie’s death Hardenberg had realized that ‘the sciences have wonderful powers of healing – at least, like opiates, they still the pain and raise us into spheres where the sunshine is eternal’. He therefore now embarked on a career in mining, and chose Freiberg as his place of study. But this Hardenberg is also Novalis, and so, at the same time, he composed ‘A Tractate on Light’, the imminent completion of which he announced to Schlegel in December, 1797. This Tractate, of which all record is lost, can be none other than the opening movements of the ‘Hymns to the Night’, poetic and artistic gestures of an almost unbearable purity of thought and feeling.

On December 1, 1797, Hardenberg arrived in Freiberg to study under the famous geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner. This was a return to life. He became a student again, a novice in the higher sense. Late into the night, he read Plato and the hermetic masters, Hermsterhuis, Plotinus and Spinoza; during the day, he attended lectures, went on field trips, and read deeply into the scientific literature of the day.

Hardenberg was to stay in Freiberg until Whitsun 1799, deepening his appreciation and grasp of both the natural sciences of chemistry, medicine, psychology, physics, mathematics, and the sacred sciences of theosophy and alchemy – the latter the title of a poem composed in June of that year:

Only one thing has mankind sought in all times,
everywhere, now in the heights, now in the depths –
under different names – ever in vain – for it hides always –
and yet man feels it always – and still never grasps it.
But there came one to whom the friendly myths of children finally disclosed the way, the key to the hidden castle.
Few understood the delicate ciphers of the answer,
but few were masters of the goal, the one thing.
Much time passed—misunderstanding sharpened our senses—
So that even myths no longer hid the truth.
Happy then the one who became wise and no longer brooded over the world,
who of his own accord desired eternal wisdom’s stone.
Only the clear-witted man is the true adept—
He turns all into life and gold—he no longer needs an elixir.
The sacred alembic no longer steams for him—
the king is within—
Delphi likewise, and finally he grasps this:
Know thyself.

On February 24, Hardenberg sent to Schlegel in Jena a package of ‘miscellaneous remarks’ or fragments, the first fruits of transforming all into Sophia. Schlegel had for some time contemplated founding a review. Hardenberg’s package of seed-thoughts (‘Pollen’) — ‘poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act . . . pure consciousness in the moment of being.’ (Blanchot) — happened therefore to provide the occasion for The Athenaeum, the most vital, transformative organ of German Romanticism, the heart of which, in a sense, as it happened, were these fragments, the first works to appear under the name of Novalis.

In these fragments, poet, philosopher and priest have become one: Novalis, the new man.

Poet and priest were one in the beginning—only later times have separated them. The true poet is however always a priest, just as the true priest has always remained a poet. Ought not the future to bring back this ancient condition of things?

Having followed Friedrich von Hardenberg’s progress, many of these pieces have a familiar ring, though they speak with a new authority, as befits their author, Novalis, one who knows, rather than Hardenberg, one who seeks:

The seat of the soul is where the inner and outer worlds touch. Where they interpenetrate—it is in every point of their interpenetration.

There are also some fragments, however, in which we recognize the new tone only:
We are on a mission: we are called to form the earth.

The philosophy implicit in these exalted moments of consciousness is the seed-philosophy of Novalis himself, poet-priest of the new era. It is present from now on in all his writing. The fragments are not aphorisms, so much as affirmations of the power of poetic consciousness.

Each word is a word of enchantment. Whatever spirit calls – such a one appears.

In the proper sense, philosophy is a caress, a testimony to the innermost love of meditation, to the absolute lust for wisdom.

. . . The resolution to philosophize is an invitation to the empirical I to remember itself, awake and become spirit. Without philosophy, there is no true morality, without morality no true philosophy.

Poetry is the hero of philosophy. Philosophy raises poetry to the level of principle. It teaches us to recognize the value of poetry. It is the theory of poetry. Philosophy shows us what poetry is, that it is all and everything.

The artist is completely transcendental.

Transcendental poetry is mixed from poetry and philosophy. Fundamentally, it is concerned with all the transcendental functions and in its activity it contains the transcendental above all. The poet is the transcendental man above all.

Genius is above all poetical. Where genius has worked – it has worked poetically. The truly moral man is the poet.

Among the ancients religion already was to a certain extent what it must become for us – practical poetry.

Formerly, all was the revelation of spirit. Now we see nothing, but dead repetition, which we do not understand. The meaning of the hieroglyph is lacking. We still live on the fruit of better times.

The world must be romanticized. Then one would recover its original meaning. Romanticism is nothing but a raising to a higher power – a qualitative potentiation. In this operation the lower self must be identified with the higher . . .

Magic is = the art of using the sense world at will.

To become a human being is an art.

Humanity – metaphor.
Only an artist can reach the meaning of life. It is only because of the weakness of our organs that we do not see into a fairy world. The first man was the first clairvoyant. To him, all appeared as spirit. What are children, but the first men? The fresh eye of a child is more prolific than the insight of the most determined seer.

What is a human being? A perfect spiritual metaphor. All true communication, then, takes place in images — and are not caresses therefore true communications?

What is nature? — a systematic, encyclopaedic index or plan of our spirit . . . The true poet is all-knowing — he is an actual world in miniature. The idea of the microcosm is the highest for mankind. We are cosmo-meters.

The world is in every case the result of an exchange between myself and the Godhead. Everything that is and arises — arises out of spiritual touching. Everything that we experience is a communication. So the world in fact is a communication — a revelation of the spirit. The time is no longer when God's spirit is comprehensible. The sense of the world is lost. We have been left standing among the letters of an alphabet.

The key to all this, in a sense, is the celebrated ‘Monologue’:

Actually, there is a foolishness about speaking and writing. True speech is pure wordplay. One can only wonder at the comical error people make when they think that they are speaking about things. No one knows precisely what is most distinctive about language, that it is concerned solely with itself. This is why it is so marvellous and fruitful a mystery that when someone speaks simply in order to speak he utters the most magnificent and original truths. But if he would speak of something specific, the capricious nature of language will make him say the most ridiculous and mistaken things. . . . It is with language as with mathematical formulas. They constitute a world by themselves, they play only among themselves, express nothing but their own marvellous nature, and for that reason they are so expressive and mirror the singular interplay of things. It is only by their freedom that they are parts of nature, and only in their free movement does the world-soul express itself, and make them a delicate measure and abstract plan of things. So it is too with language . . . Only someone with a profound feeling for language, who feels it in its application, its flow, its rhythm, its musical spirit — only he who hears its inner nature and apprehends within himself its intimate and subtle movement . . . yes, only that person is a prophet.
In summer 1798 — mid-July to mid-August — Hardenberg went to Teplitz in Bohemia to take a water cure. Fragments and snatches from Teplitz give evidence likewise of the transcendental life, the life in the spirit or the higher I, that now could call itself Novalis. Three interrelated themes emerge in the fragments of the period: woman (‘Sophie, or on women’), Christianity (‘thetic cultivation of the New Testament, or the Christian Religion’), and daily life (‘notes on the edge of life’).

The heart is the key to life and to the world. If our life is as precarious as it is, it is so in order that we should love and need another. From the fact of one’s own insufficiency, one becomes open to the intervention of another, and it is this intervention which is its goal. When we are ill, others must look after us, and only they can do so. From this point of view, Christ is indisputably the key to the world.

Daily life is a priestly life, like that of the Vestal Virgins. We are concerned only with keeping alive a holy and secret flame . . .

Our whole life is divine service.

Much else was occupying Hardenberg at this time. Returning to Freiberg, essential strands of life and interest were began to converge. Philosophy was becoming clearer to him as the free practice of the imagination, ‘magic idealism’ – an ‘experimental physics of the human soul (Gemuet)’ – based on the absolute correspondence of inner and outer worlds:

Everything is magic or is nothing. . . .

Our inner world must correspond with the outer world completely, down to the smallest detail.

As the theory and practice of this study grew stronger in him, Novalis’ penetration of the invisible world – his transformation of the visible into the invisible – flowered into an epic project: nothing less than a universal encyclopedia or compendium of knowing. To penetrate, transform, and communicate the full fruit of the interpenetration of all the sciences: the new epoch could rest on nothing less. Like his great contemporary, Goethe, Novalis proposed a ‘hermetic’ science, an empiricism or phenomenology of consciousness and love as the healthy antidote to the mechanical, death-dealing science that clearly already had the ascendency in his time.

Poetry, Medicine, Teleology, Pedagogy, Aesthetics, History, Logic, Psychology, Philosophy, Chemistry, Archaeology, Physical History,
Cosmology, Theosophy, Morality and Religion, Doctrine of the Person, Human Relations, The Future, Anthropology... Such themes and more occupy the more than one thousand fragments that make up the 'Encyclopaedic Material'. E.g.:

**Medicine.** Usefulness of every illness: poetry of every illness. Illness would not be part of life if, by uniting with illness, our existence were not elevated.

**Psychology.** Love is the final goal of the World: the amen of the universe.

**Anthropology.** The child is love become visible. And we ourselves, we too are a germ of love which has become visible. A germ of love between nature and spirit, or art.

**Theosophy.** God is love. Love is the supreme reality, the first cause.

**Encyclopaedia.** A ‘theory’ of love is the highest science – the science of nature – or the nature of science.

**Grammar.** Language is Delphi.

**Human Science.** Everything man does is man – or (what amounts to the same) is a constituent part of humanity, something essentially human.

**Magic.** The magus of physics should be able to animate nature and lead her, just as he does his body, at will.

**Doctrine of Spirits.** The world of spirits is, in fact, already open: it is always manifest. If we were suddenly to have the necessary elasticity, we would find ourselves among them, in the world of spirits...

**Philosophy.** The unknown, the mysterious is the ‘result’ and the beginning of all...

**Medicine.** Every disease is a musical problem: its cure, a musical solution. The more rapid and complete the resolution, the greater the musical talent of the doctor...

**Cosmology.** – All is a symptom of all...

**Cosmology.** Whether I situate the universe in myself or myself in the universe is all the same. Spinoza placed everything outside – Fichte returned everything within. The same is true of freedom. If freedom exists in the whole, then it exists also in me. If I give freedom the name of necessity, and if Necessity is in the All, then necessity is in me, and inversely. Questions of this sort abound in the misunderstandings of philosophy in general...

**Politics.** We are more closely bound to the invisible than to the visible...
Biology. Life is a moral principle. (Moral imperfection: imperfection of life.)

Every science becomes poetry. After it has become philosophy.

Thoughts, like flowers, are certainly the most refined ‘evolution’ of the power of plasticity – the most universal power of nature, carried to the highest power.

The organs of thought are the generative parts of nature – the genital organs of the world.

On May 12, Whitsun, 1799, Friedrich von Hardenberg graduated with a degree in mining from Freiberg. He was in his twenty-eighth year. As Novalis, he had already made his mark: he was a leading light of German Romanticism, the colleague of Schlegel, Schelling, Ritter. He had dined with Goethe. The Sistine Madonna in the Dresden Gallery had had its effect. He was engaged to Julie von Charpentier.

He returned to Weissenfels to be Director of the Salt Mines. He worked at his job with energy and devotion.

July found him in Jena, visiting Schlegel. There he met the poet and novelist Ludwig Tieck. It was Tieck who, out of his own poetic soul and his devotion to Jacob Boehme (to whom he introduced von Hardenberg), was able to divine the secret meaning of Novalis as expressed both in the fragments – ‘Pollen’ and ‘Faith and Love’ and the still fragmentary, unpublished, but nevertheless complete, ‘The Disciples (or Novices) of Sais’.

Here the poet, the ‘true decipherer’, is the liturgist of nature, its priest. As a poet, and Fichtean, his path to the understanding of nature is inwards, but the end, whatever the way, is always the same: ‘One reached the goal at Sais; he lifted the veil of the Goddess,/ Only to see, wonder of wonders, himself!’ Man and nature are a unity, the way in and the way out are one, but man alone is the key, the sacred bond. The first section is entitled ‘The Novice’.

Manifold are the ways of man. Whoever follows these and compares them will see wonderful figures arise, figures that seem to belong to that great ciphered script that one sees everywhere: in wings, eggshells, clouds, snow, in crystals and stone formations, inside and outside mountains, plants, beasts, men, and in the heavenly lights, on scored disks of pitch or glass, or in iron filings around a magnet, and in the strange conjunctions of change. In these one suspects a key to the magic writing, even a grammar, but our intuition assumes no definite form and seems unwilling to become a higher key. It is as though an alkahest has been poured over the senses of men...
From afar I heard one say: the incomprehensible is but the result of incomprehension, which seeks only what it has and so can make no new discoveries. We do not understand speech, because speech does not understand itself, nor wish to. The true Sanskrit would be to speak in order to speak, because speech is its own desire and essence.

Not long after, there was another who said: The Holy Scripture requires no explanation. Who speaks true is full of eternal life, his written word seems wondrously akin to the mysteries, for it is a chord taken from the symphony of the universe.

Surely the voice was speaking of our teacher, for he knows how to gather together the traits that are scattered everywhere . . .

The teacher is a Pythagorean and a Goethean. His way is outwards, through the world of perception. Endlessly he observed the skies – the stars at night and cloud formations by day; he gathered stones, flowers, insects; he roamed the surface of the earth, he explored its depths. Finding connections everywhere, he no longer saw things apart; all existed in relationship, in a mutuality of identity – ‘sometimes men were stars, stones beasts, clouds plants . . .’ He played with forces and phenomena, and plucked the strings in search of chords and memories.

But the novice is different. Everything led him back into himself. His search was for the divine, miraculous image around and through which all connections and relations lived. This image he always held in his mind and heart as the source and end of all his thoughts. These, he was convinced, would somehow lead him to the maiden for whom his spirit yearned unceasingly, and whom he knew to be invisibly ‘present’.

This ‘maiden’, or universal mediating image, is the novice’s secret. With this faith everything converges into a higher image, a new design; and everything that was strange becomes familiar. Connected to this secret is a mysterious child, whom the teacher chose and wished to make the teacher in his place. ‘He had great dark eyes with sky-blue whites, his skin gleamed like lilies and his hair like sunlit cloud at evening’. His voice melted everyone’s heart; they would gladly have given him everything. ‘He smiled with infinite earnestness, and when we were with him, we felt strangely happy.’ With this child, who left, the novice felt a deep affinity.

‘Near him, everything within me seemed to grow clearer. If he had stayed longer, I would surely have learned more within myself, and in the end, perhaps, my heart would have opened, and my tongue been set free.’
The second section is entitled 'Nature'. In the beginning was unity, pure interiority. Only with language came the naming of differences, things, and with it the splitting of the original light of inwardness into various powers. Gradually thereafter men came to place things in opposition to themselves, and lost the ability to restore at will, with each perception, the natural unity, the original state; no longer were they able to gather together, as the teacher could, the traits that are scattered everywhere. To early human beings everything had meaning. The language of nature was human language, nature was human nature, and all things were natural, companionable. While under the heavy hand of science nature 'died, leaving behind dead, quivering remains', if we but look at the earliest accounts, we find the purest expression of the one language that true poets and scientists, as liturgists of nature, have always spoken.

Novalis, however, realizes that being at home in the universe is a project fraught with ambiguity. He recognises the fatal tension that exists between humanity and nature for, although originally one, now that they are fallen into two, the return to unity seems to pose a choice. To some it seems that human beings must either succumb to outwardness - the terrible mill of death, monstrous bodily change, voracity and mad luxuriance - or turn inward. Put this way, the choice is false: 'nature itself is a game played by their thoughts, a wild dream fantasy.' Nature is but the mask of our desires. The man who is awake sees that all is but the immaterial ghosts of his own weakness:

(He) is the lord of the universe, his self soars all-powerful over the abyss . . . His heart strives to proclaim and diffuse harmony. As he moves into the infinite, he becomes more and more at one with himself and his creation around him, and at every step he sees the eternal, all-embracing efficacy of a high ethical world system, the citadel of his self, emerge clearly.'

The voices - for this section of 'The Disciples of Sais' is told in speeches - all seem right to the novice, who becomes confused. Then a merry youth with roses and ivy on his brow interrupts the earnestness of the gathering with a plea for joy and a tale of love. In the land of the setting sun lived two young people, Hyacinth and Rosebud, who loved each other greatly. One day a wise old man arrived from faraway places. He sat down before the house where Hyacinth lived. Hyacinth brought him bread and wine, and the old man began to tell stories. He talked on
and on, late into the night and into the next day, continuing for three days. Hyacinth was completely taken with the stranger; they went everywhere together, even into depths of the earth. At last the old man left, leaving behind a little book that only Hyacinth could read.

Hyacinth was changed; he had neither time nor thought for Rosebud now. Soon he announced that he too must leave: his peace had gone, he must seek his heart and love. Where he would go, he did not know – only that he must seek the Mother of all things, the veiled Virgin.

He left, asking everywhere for the sacred Goddess Isis, without avail. By chance, however, he met a throng of flowers who tell that they have heard of Isis – she is to be found upwards or above – whence they came. Thus Hyacinth came to the place he sought, his heart beating with infinite yearning. Shyness overcame him, he fell asleep, 'for it was only a dream could take him to the Holy of Holies'. This dream led him, with the sound of music, through endless halls of curious things, familiar and yet of unimaginable splendour.

The last vestiges of earthliness disappeared as though dissolved in air, and he stood before the celestial Virgin. He raised the light shining veil and Rosebud sank into his arms. Distant music surrounded the secrets of their love, the outpourings of yearning, shutting out everything inharmonious from that place.

The novices parted, but one or two remained behind to continue their discussions: 'O, if only man,' they said, 'could understand the inner music of nature, if only he had a sense for outward harmonies. But he scarcely knows that we belong together and that none of us can exist without the others.'

Man has been cut off from nature, no question of that; and the way back must be found. But what is the way, which are the means? They must lie to hand.

Attentiveness to subtle signs and traits, an inward poetic life, practiced senses, a simple, God-fearing heart – these are the requisites of a true friend of nature.

Feeling and attention; and the interplay of these:

Will he ever learn to feel? This divine, most natural of all sense is but little known to him. Yet feeling would bring back the old time for which we yearn. The element of feeling is an inward light that breaks into stronger, more beautiful colours. If one would feel truly, then stars would rise within one; one would learn to feel the whole world . . .
To everything that man undertakes he must give his undivided attention, his self; once he has done this, miraculously thoughts arise, or a new kind of perceptions, which appear to be nothing more than delicate, abrupt movements of a coloured pencil, or strange contractions and figurations of an elastic fluid . . .

Only through the play of attention (shades of Fichte) does man become aware of his uniqueness, his special freedom, and learn to think and feel at once. The outer world then becomes transparent; the inner varied and meaningful. Poets have always lived in this state. The novices praise the one who is at once the bride of nature and the power in her that engenders and creates her child, the artist. Long and detailed instructions in meditation follow. If these are followed, then 'it seems to one as if he were awakening from a deep sleep, as though he had just begun to be at home in the universe, as if the light of day had just broken in on his inner world'.

The fifteen so-called 'Spiritual Songs', first published as a group only after Hardenberg's death - can it be said that Novalis died? He is immortal - also took shape at this time. The story begins with a notebook entry, a lengthy annotation to a brief entry made at Teplitz on the need for 'notes on daily life'.

The annotation to this note speaks of the meal taken in common as a symbolic action, the image and gesture of unity. It moves on to unions in general and to marriage in particular as the paradigm of total union. Union, the fragment continues, is properly an eating, in the primordial sense, an act of assimilation, appropriation. All spiritual joy or sustenance is a meal in this sense, a Holy Supper for the soul, as it is for the body: 'the occasion and the mysterious means of an earthly transfiguration and divinisation - a living intercourse with the living absolute . . .'. Song VII reads as follows:

    Few know
    love's secret,
    feel insatiability
    and everlasting thirst.
    the holy supper's
    celestial meaning
    remains a riddle
    to earthly senses
    but whoever has drawn
    life's breath
from warm, loved lips,  
whoever's heart holy fervor  
has melted in quivering waves,  
whoever's eyes have ever lifted  
to measure  
heaven's unfathomable depths –  
that person will eat his body  
and drink his blood  
ever forever.

For who has guessed the earthly body's  
higher meaning?

Who can say  
he understands the blood?

Once all is body,  
ONE body, then swims  
the blessed couple  
in celestial blood –  
O! that the world sea  
would grow red  
and rocks rise up  
in fragrant flesh!

Then the magic meal would never end  
nor love ever find satisfaction.

You can never have the beloved  
inwardly enough, enough your own.

Transformed by ever gentler lips  
the companion becomes  
more inward, ever closer.

Warmer pleasure  
thrills through the soul.

Thirstier, hungrier  
grows the heart:  
love's bliss endures  
from eternity to eternity.

If ever those fasting  
once tasted,  
they would abandon all,  
and sit down with us  
at longing's table  
that never grows empty.

They would never know  
love's unending fullness  
and praise the sustenance  
of body and blood.
The first influence on the Songs came from Friedrich Schlegel who, with Schleiermacher, another contributor to The Athenaeum, recognized the primacy of Hardenberg/Novalis' religious genius: 'Perhaps you still have the choice, my friend, to be either the last Christ, the Brutus of the old religion, or the Christ of the New Gospel.' The choice was no choice: Novalis was of the new dispensation. Christianity for him was of the future, as the Greek Gods were of the past. Yet he drew deep and long on the Christian past. He loved old church hymns, but intensified, interiorized — above all by his repeated visits to the grave, his road to Damascus and his Easter in one. Easter 1798 (and 1799) found him there on Sophie's death day. No wonder then that Song XV reads:

Mary, in a thousand images,
adorably I see you shown;
but none of these can show you
as my soul beholds you.

I only know that worldly bustle
has fled me like a dream;
and namelessly sweet heaven
now sits forever in my soul.

But if Sophia/Mary now sits firmly in the centre of his soul, priestess and guardian of every thought and perception, what was perceived and thought, the meaning of the world, the soul's power of perception, Novalis now named also thus (Song XII):

Where do you wait, comfort of the world?
Your resting-place is long prepared.
Each soul sees you longingly,
opening to your blessing.

Powerfully, Father, pour him forth,
give him to us from your arms.
Only innocence, sweet shame and love
have kept him from coming long ago.

Drive him from you, into our arms,
still warm from your breath >
Gather him in heavy clouds,
let him come down to us below.

Send him in cool streams,
in fiery flames let him flare,
in air and oil, tone and dew,
let him penetrate our earthly home . . .

He is the star, he is the sun,
he is the eternal spring of life,
from plant and stone, sea and light
his childlike face shines out.

In all things his childlike deeds,
his warm love, never rest.
Unconsciously, he presses
forever true on every breast.

For us a god, for himself a child,
he loves us all heart-inwardly.
He becomes our meat and drink,
faithfulness to him our thanks must be . . .

'The Sacred Songs' prepare us for 'The Hymns to the Night', which clearly also had their origin in Sophie's death. These, too, saw their composition during this time, at first in free verse, then in prose with rhymed verse passages.

This is one of the high, prophetic moments of Romanticism, showing quite clearly its spiritual origin and end. The night or darkness that the Hymns extol is a higher light: the northern light of the midnight sun, 'night's lovely sun'. For there are two darknessness: a darkness which is only darkness, concealing and holding light captive. This is a dark night of unconsciousness. But there is also a mystical darkness, a luminous night of superconsciousness. Sufi masters refer to it as the dark Noontide, the black Light. It is a suprasensory reality, an innerness of light which, now left outside, appears dark. In other words, the night of Novalis is none other than the 'mundus imaginalis', the concrete spiritual universe of Hurqalya. As Corbin says, 'To see beings and things in the Northern Light is to see them in the earth of Hurqalya, that is, to see them in the light of the Angel'. This is the esoteric night of hidden meanings, the theophanies of the deus absconditus.

Here it is that the poet, the sage or philosopher encounters his 'perfect nature', the angel of his being, who bore him and to whom he gives birth. Here the hierogamy occurs. When the lover has become the very substance of love, he becomes both lover and beloved - 'for I am yours and mine'. By this union, this encounter, one becomes a perfected being: 'calling the night to life you made me fully human'.
Spiritual organs appropriate to the epiphanies manifested by the angel now open up: as many eyes as there are worlds. To live beyond space and time in this night of light and love that is the Imaginal World is the dream, the goal of human existence.

But how difficult it is! Yet this vision contains and sustains all. To enter it one needs only to be reborn: delivered from this world into the next. By which is meant: the birth in the Imagination. Then light’s chains, the bonds of space and time, are ripped apart. Matter turns to dust, centuries evaporate. The visible becomes invisible; man becomes an angel. His allegiances become angelic; his heart is true to the inner light – ‘to the Night, and to creative Love, her daughter’. Now he acknowledges the true source of things, ‘the chaste, wise world of Archetypes’.

The last three Hymns change focus. The experience at the grave, the power of earthly love transfigured, transformed the poet. The earthly token of such transforming love is Sophia, but its heavenly, cosmic archetype is Christ. As the poet awakens to higher consciousness, the love of Sophia reveals itself to be the love of Christ. The fourth Hymn, then, turns to the divine Logos with breathtaking daring:

Unending life
rocks powerfully within me,
I look from above
down upon you.
O breathe me, beloved!
Ravish me,
that I may fall asleep
and love.
I feel death’s
rejuvenating flood
transform my blood –
I live by day
full of courage and faith
and die nightly
in holy fire.

Then the poet turns to sing of the age of the gods that the horror of death interrupted. The heart’s joy departed; sadness and longing took its place. ‘The old world bowed . . . The gods with their retinue disappeared – Nature stood alone and lifeless . . . Sworn faith left too, and with it its all-changing, all-relating divine twin, Imagination.’ The divine light withdrew within, into the highest reaches of the soul.
There, within the veil of Night, it awaited only humanity's awakening. Then came 'the youth who through the length of Time stood upon our graves in deepest contemplation' — Christ — the death which would reveal life's meaning. He remains still, and with him his Mother, the Night: Mary, the Mother, the Bride, Sophia.

The Hymns end with 'Longing for Death'. It is an ambiguous conclusion, dealing with the difficulty of returning to this world once one's heart has tasted that one. Old things are put aside; where to find the energy to take up new ones? What to do with the things of time in the light of eternal things? The great urge is to return to sleep and death. What can this world hold? The answer of course is that it must be transformed: 'A dream will break our bonds apart,/ And sink us into the Father's lap.'

The epitome of Novalis' idea of transformation may be said to lie in his vision of the 'blue flower', contained in the first chapter of Heinrich von Ofterdingen, his great unfinished Orphic novel of poetic education. As the story opens, Heinrich is lying in bed, thinking of stories a stranger has just told:

It is not the treasures that have awakened such inexpressible longings in me (he thought); there is no greed in me; I only yearn to catch a glimpse of the blue flower. It is always in my mind. I can think and write of nothing else . . . I feel rapturously happy; and inner turmoil only overtakes me when I do not have the flower before my eye . . .

He falls asleep and dreams of immeasurable distances, wild and unfamiliar regions. Like the initiate in the Corpus Hermeticum, and in a paraphrase of Hardenberg's own life:

he wandered over oceans with inconceivable ease; he saw wild creatures; he lived many many kinds of people, in war, in wild tumult, in quiet huts. He fell into captivity and ignominious affliction. Sensations rose in him to unknown heights. He went through an infinite variety of experiences; he died and came to life again, loved most passionately, and was then separated from his loved one forever.

Towards daybreak Heinrich's soul grew calmer. He found himself walking through a dark forest that led to a rocky gorge. He started climbing and, as he did so, the forest grew sparser. He reached a small meadow, behind which jutted a crag with a cave-like passageway cut into it. He followed this. It opened out into a great space, filled with a
shaft of light rising from the floor like a great fountain. It reached up to
the ceiling, and then came tumbling down in innumerable drops like
water into a basin. A holy stillness filled the place.

Heinrich approached the basin. Emitting a faint blue light, it surged
and quivered in endless colours. He dipped his hand in and wet his
lips: a breath passed through him. He felt refreshed. He longed to
bathe; so he undressed and stepped into the basin. A heavenly
sensation flowed through him. The waves lapping at his chest were
damsels dissolving at his touch. Intoxicated, he swam with the stream
as it flowed from the basin. Then sweet sleep fell upon him and he
found himself by a fountain, on a gentle sward. Blue, veined cliffs lay
before him; the light was bright and mild. The sky was blue, clear. His
attention was drawn to a tall light-blue flower that stood near the spring
and touched it with its broad shining leaves. Around it were innumer-
able flowers and a delicious perfume filled the air. He saw nothing but
the blue flower. Inexpressible tenderness filled him. He moved
towards it. As he did so, its leaves became glossier and laid themselves
closely around the stalk. The flower then leaned towards him and
within its petals, upon a great blue corolla, a face delicately hovered . . .

This blue flower, unveiled in a dream within a dream, in the
innermost depths of the soul, speaks of the archetypal human being:
the eternal priestess of the heart, the ‘visible spirit of song’ in the
human soul. In a sense it is what Novalis called in German the ‘Gemuet’,
a word which the dictionary defines as: mind; heart, cast of mind;
disposition, nature; temperament, emotion, feeling, sentiment. For
Novalis, the Gemuet was the initiated human soul in its full interiority, its
wholeness as microcosm and universal key.

In our Gemuet everything is bound together in the most original, pleasant
and vital fashion. The strangest things come together there in a single place,
a single time, in a particular analogy, or by peculiarity or chance. In this way
marvellous unities and strange associations arise, in which one thing
recalls all and becomes the sign of many, and is itself in turn symbolized
and called forth by many. Understanding and imagination are united there
in the most astonishing way through time and space, and one can say that
each thought and every appearance of our Gemuet is the most individual
member of a thoroughly original whole.

Heinrich von Ofterdingen, which also contains the celebrated tale of
‘Eros and Fable’, ends with the birth of Astralis, the spiritual child
of Heinrich, the poet, and his departed love, Mathilda. By this, the blue flower is revealed as 'the sweet birth in the beating of the heart':

One summer morning when I was young
I felt my life pulse
for the first time — and as love
lost itself in deeper ecstasies
I woke up gradually, and the desire
for ever more inward, even total, intermingling
grew more pressing with every instant.
Sensuality is my being's procreative power.
I am the centre, the holy source,
whence every stormy longing flows
and whither every longing broken into manyness
quietly draws together again.
You do not know me, yet you saw me become —
Were you not a witness how, while still
sleepwalking, I met myself for the first time
that happy evening? Did not a sweet shower
of enthusiasm fall upon you too? —
I lay sunk in honey-cups.
I was fragrant. Flowers swayed softly
in the golden morning air. I was an inner
spring, a sweet struggle, all flowed
through me and over me and gently raised me up.
There the first grain on pollen, sunk
into the stigma, recalls the kiss after the meal.
I welled back into my own flood.
It was like lightning. Now I could come to life,
the delicate fibres and calyx move.
Swiftly thoughts, and I myself also,
began to crystallize into earthly senses.
I was still blind, yet bright stars already spun
through the marvellous distances of my being.
I was not yet near to anything, but distantly
I caught a suggestion of ancient and future times.
Born of sadness, love and retribution
the growth of consciousness was but a flight,
and as the flames of desire beat in me
I was penetrated by the highest melancholy.
The world lay blooming around the bright hill,
the prophet's words were wings,
Mathilde and Henry were no longer alone
but were now united in a single image.
Newborn, I raised myself to the heavens.
In a blessed moment of illumination
earthly destiny was fulfilled.
Time had now lost its rights,
what it had lent, it now reclaimed.

The new world breaks in,
darkens brightest sunshine,
from mossy ruins now one sees
a wonderfully strange future shimmering,
and what once seemed commonplace,
now seems just as wonderful and strange.
<One in all and all in one,
God's image in plant and stone,
God's spirit in men and beasts:
all this must be taken into one's soul.
No more the order of time and space,
but now the future in the past.>
The kingdom of love has begun,
the fable begins to spin.
The primordial game of each nature begins,
people plan words of power,
and the great soul of the world
moves everywhere, blooms ceaselessly.
All must reach into one another,
each through the other thrive and ripen,
each in all represented . . .
World becomes dream, dream becomes world,
what one believes happens,
one can see it from afar.
Here fantasy first freely commands
at will the weaving of the threads,
here concealing, there unfolding,
floating off in magic mist.
Desire and yearning, death and life
are here in inmost sympathy –
Whoever gives himself to highest love
his wounds of love will never heal.
The bond drawn across our inner eye
must painfully be ripped apart.
Sometimes the truest heart needs be orphaned
before it flee this world of sadness.
The body must dissolve in tears,
the world become a gaping tomb,
in which, consumed by anxious longing,
the human heart, in ashes, prostrates herself.

Dream has become the world. The human soul had recognized itself in the world, as the world. The last fragments, besides those on science, particularly mathematics – whole studies can be and have been written on Novalis's Romantic Pythagoreanism – and on history – space permits no more than a mention of Novalis' last work, the apocalyptic essay 'Christendom or Europe' – have as a hidden threat the self-subsistent soul or interior world in its totality, the heart of the being: the Gemuet. Poetry, the highest philosophy, becomes its expression. 'The innocence of your heart makes you a prophet', Heinrich is told, 'All things will become intelligible to you. The world and its history will become Holy Scripture...'.

Hardenberg spent the year 1799 in geognostic and literary work. He made new friends – besides Tieck, Henrik Steffens (the Norwegian romantic philosopher and naturalist) and Jean-Paul – and in December his appointment as Assessor of Mines became official. In April, he finished the first part of Heinrich von Ofterdingen. Five days later, he applied for a post of district judiciary in Thuringia. These duties he would carry out in addition to his responsibilities in the salt works. The two jobs together would allow him to establish a household of his own with Julie von Charpentier. From the middle of May to the middle of June, he was in Thuringia, on a mineralogical expedition. Then Tieck visited, briefly, before Hardenberg was off again, inspecting salt works. Finally, at the end of August, destiny showed its hand for the last time: a haemorrhage wracked his delicate body, and the feverish presence of tuberculosis made itself known.

Seven months of struggle followed. Bowing before his fate, accepting it as given by God, he gave himself nevertheless to hope and surrendered to the will for life. It was not easy. As he noted, he had no gift for martyrdom. Yet he knew he chose his life; nothing came by chance: he would live it out. A late fragment reads:

When they are properly understood the law of grace and the law of free will are not at all contradictory; both belong to a single whole and often need each other.
In October, his younger brother drowned in the Saale River. From November to mid-January, he lay in Dresden, scarcely a shadow, no longer recognizable. In December, he received his appointment to the district judiciary in Thuringia. But his strength was failing. Late in January, he returned home. On the fourth anniversary of Sophie’s death (March 19) he began to slide perceptibly towards another world. Early in the morning of March 25, 1801, after breakfast, listening to music played on the piano by his brother, in the presence of his parents, his friend Schlegel and his betrothed, Hardenberg fell asleep in perfect harmony, never to reawaken. Among his last fragments we find:

It is most understandable why, in the end, all will become poetry – will not the world, in the end, become soul?
The poet who was to become known by the name Novalis was born Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg on a day in May 1772 when an eclipse of the sun took place, the eldest son and second of the eleven children of Heinrich Ulrich Erasmus Baron von Heidenberg and his second wife. The Baron was the proprietor of the salt-mines of Weissenfels, and a pious convert to the sect of the Moravian Brethren. The boy's delicate health in childhood led to a serious illness at the age of nine, after recovering from which he received a Gymnasium education. At the age of eighteen, he went on to study at the University of Jena, where he attended Schiller's lectures on poetry and a course on the philosophy of Kant, and was befriended by Friedrich Schlegel. He then went on to study law and jurisprudence at the University of Wittenburg, where he graduated in the summer of 1794, proceeding to serve a term of apprenticeship at Tennstedt with the magistrate Just, who became his friend and later his first biographer. Following this, Novalis spent two years as a functionary in his father's salt-mining company at Weissenfels. At the end of 1797, he went to Freiberg, where he attended the courses of the celebrated mineralogist Gottlob Werner, and studied the natural sciences, physics, chemistry and mathematics; he also became acquainted with animal magnetism, or galvanism, as practised by Johann Wilhelm Ritter. At Whitsun 1799, he returned to Weissenfels to occupy an official post in the management of the mines there.

The first meeting of the young von Hardenberg with Sophie von Kühn took place at her family's manor of Grüningen in November 1794, when she was still only 13. They were secretly betrothed in the spring of the following year. That summer, Novalis briefly encountered Fichte and Hölderlin at Jena. In November, Sophie, now his official fiancée, first succumbed to the fatal illness which, despite an operation at the hospital of Jena in the summer of 1796, was to lead to her painful death at her home in Grüningen in March the following year. Two
months after Sophie’s death, Novalis experienced, while mourning at her graveside, a vision that was to have a determining effect on the work by which he is best known. He did not survive his beloved for long, but died of consumption in March 1801.

To this bare outline of the outer facts of Novalis’ life may suitably be adjoined the following summary by the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey of its inner meaning:

Novalis shows all things to us in his own distinctive light. To pronounce his name is enough to make the world about us appear as it did to him – like a valley at rest in the calm of evening, disclosing itself to the traveller returning down the mountainside in the last rays of the sun: all around, the motionless warmth of the air; in the still blue sky, the blurred silver effulgence of the moon; the mountains encircle us, but with an intimacy in no way oppressive; it never occurs to us that on the other side are roads leading to towns and tumultuous regions. Everything contributes to this impression: Novalis’ way of thinking, his destiny, the conditions in which he lived. He was so far from the noise of current affairs, withdrawn from life’s pressing contact. On the threshold of maturity it befell him to experience those happy days at Jena when the romantic dream of the universe was blossoming, where Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel, Tieck and Schelling were conceiving the dream of a new poetry and a new philosophy. To what happened then, he imparts in some way the quality and the depth of his soul; before reaching his thirtieth year he dies. Over his memory floats a gleam of poetry, which extends to the words of all his friends whenever they evoke it.

(From Der Erlebnis und die Dichtung, 1905)

‘Hymns to the Night’ is, with the exception of two brief texts on religious themes, the only complete work to have been published by Novalis during his lifetime. Of his other writings, all that remains of his initiatory romance, the ‘Disciples at Saïs’, are two preliminary chapters, while ‘Heinrich von Ofterdingen’ consists of no more than a first part, which contains a few poems, and some sketches and notes for the remainder. The fifteen ‘Canticles’, or Geistliche Lieder, that he completed after the ‘Hymns’, were first published posthumously, as were the nine series of Fragments, or Pensées, written between 1795 and 1800, a selection of which is known by the apposite title of ‘Pollen’.

Novalis’ most devoted French translator, Armel Guerne, has referred
to toutes les facettes de cet unique diamant noir que sont les Hymnes à la Nuit, a phrase which serves usefully to remind us that the six Hymnen which make up Novalis' capital work should essentially be read as an ensemble of interdependent parts. If I have translated only the first two of them, that is because my German is so rudimentary that I do not feel competent to transpose the more strictly scanned and rhyming sections of Novalis' text into anything like an English equivalent. The result of translating these passages without taking their rhythm and rhyme into account would have been indistinguishable from the prose which precedes them. The kind of interdependence that careful reading of the 'Hymns' reveals is paralleled by a similar interconnection between the keywords distinguishing each of them. The nimbus of meaning emanated by each of these words intermingles with those attached to the others in Novalis' individual vocabulary, simultaneously enhancing both an initial impression of nebulous otherworldliness and an increased comprehension of their inner sense when grasped in conjunction with one another. The resultant semantic density of Novalis' texts is aptly suggested by Guerne's choice of a faceted diamond as a metaphor characterizing the 'Hymns'.

(III)

The Hymnen an die Nacht were composed at some time between 1797, the year of Sophie's death, and 1800, in the January of which year Novalis wrote to Friedrich Schlegel offering the work for publication in his friend's review, the Athenaeum. In a letter to Ludwig Tieck written two months later, Novalis remarked that he hoped Schlegel would excise the word Hymnen from the title; nevertheless the sequence first published later in 1800 in Schlegel's review retains its original name. It is known that not long after Sophie's death Novalis happened to read Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts'. Any resemblance between that work and the 'Hymns' however, is purely superficial; whereas Young's first title is 'The Complaint', Novalis' poem is remarkable in its achievement of a serene transcendence of bereavement and mourning through the resolution of grief into rapture rather than resignation.

The title of Schubert's lied: Nacht und Träume (D827), composed some two decades after the first flowering of Romanticism, epitomizes the twin themes most dominant in the work of nearly all the most outstanding German poets of Novalis' generation and their successors.
But the Night of Novalis' 'Hymns' differs significantly in many respects from that of his contemporaries. Among these, Jean-Paul (Richter) produced a prophetic text (in a series wherein he recorded his dreams) that anticipates by more than half a century the questions and proclamations of Nietzsche's 'madman' in Le Gai Savoir (III, 125: 1882), demanding whether there could ever be an end to the nights succeeding God's assassination by mankind. In Jean-Paul's dream of the dead Christ, he 'gazed into the abyss, crying “Father, where art thou?”', but heard 'nothing but the storm that rages uncontrollably for ever', and saw 'the rainbow of all beings shining across the abyss without being created by any sun!'

The epoch heralded by the enthronement instigated by Robespierre of the goddess of Reason on the altar of Nôtre Dame when the French Revolution was at its height had its philosophic basis formulated at the same moment by Hegel, whose purely abstract Absolute Spirit results in reality from the death of the living personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was in Martin Buber's analysis of this epoch, which he entitled 'Eclipse of God', that I first came across the words of Hölderlin that I used as an epigraph for my own 'Night Thoughts': Aber weh! es wandelt in Nacht, es wohnt, wie in Orcus Ohne Goettliches unser Geschlect . . . (But alas! our generation walks in night, dwells as in Hades, without the Divine . . .)

It will not be as out of place as might at first appear to bring in at this point a passing reference to the best-known work of the 'minor' Victorian poet James Thomson, whose 'The City of Dreadful Night' first appeared in 1874. Thomson first wrote pseudonymously under the initials B.V., standing respectively for Bysshe (Shelley) and Vanolis (Novalis).

The Night that inspired Novalis, however, cannot properly be qualified as dreadful; neither should it be confused with 'the dark night of the soul'. If night has a terrible aspect, when regarded as representing the Stygian darkness consequent on 'the death of God', it will ever continue also to exemplify the inexhaustible maternal power of recuperative latency, from which a new light may emerge to make life and death cease to appear contradictory. In the very first of the Hymnen, Night is already identified with der Mutter liebe Jugend geigt, after whose visitation Light, praised previously as the innermost essence of life, whose presence alone can reveal the kingdoms of this world in their
miraculous splendour, appears comparatively jejune; while the infinite
eyes that Night opens within us appear more divine than all the
sparkling stars of heaven. It is plain that for Novalis, as for all the
Romantics, access had become available as never before to the inner
realm we now refer to as the Unconscious, the domain Goethe
revealed as being that of the Mothers, preternaturally ancient yet for
ever young, being unbounded by Time or Place.

Reference was made in the second of these notes to two types of
interdependence that become apparent when one pays attention to
the distinctive structure of the Hymnen. There are two further inter-
relationships to be observed if more than a superficial appreciation is to
result from reading them. The first is their intimate connection with
Novalis’ suffering, at the age of twenty-five, the loss of the adolescent
Sophie von Kühn he was longing to marry. The other concerns the
relation between the Hymnen and the Fragmente Novalis was accumulat-
ning both before and during the comparatively brief period when the
Hymnen were being composed.

Little appears to be known of Novalis’ encounter with Hölderlin in
1795 at Jena, beyond the fact that they did in fact meet there in the early
summer. It was at the end of this year that Hölderlin first became tutor
in the home of the Frankfurt banker Gontard, whose wife Susette
became before long the poet’s adored Diotima. By the autumn of 1797,
Hölderlin had left the Gontard household in disgrace, his passionate
affair with Diotima continuing thereafter only in secret and with
frustrating difficulty. By that time, Sophie von Kühn was already dead.
When Hölderlin first heard, in 1802, that Diotima had died, his mental
balance was already gravely impaired; the news from Frankfurt led to
worse disturbance, which led in turn four years later to confinement,
followed by thirty-six years of sequestration. The differences between
the two poets far outweigh any similarities they may be thought to
share. Among these, even their tragic bereavements are entirely
dissimilar. While Diotima’s beauty was that of a mature housewife and
mother, Sçoschen, however charmingly precocious, was a still inexperi-
enced virgin. In a Fragment of 1798, Novalis refers to the schöne Geheimnis
of the young girl, rendering her inexpressibly seductive, as being the
presentiment of maternity, the hint of a future world sleeping in her in
order to blossom later. The entries in his Journal written at the time of Sœfchen's death and during the period of mourning that followed it, may convey to some present-day readers a certain impression of morbidity, but they provide no evidence that the writer's sanity could ever have been in question.

In the daily Journal kept by Novalis after Sophie's death, between April and July 1797, the entry for the 13th of May is of particular interest, as it is to be found transcribed directly, in lyric form, in the IIIrd Hymn: 'In the evening I went to see Sophie. Moments of overwhelming enthusiasm. With one breath I dispersed the tomb like a heap of dust—centuries seemed no more than instants—her presence became evident to me—I had the feeling she was on the point of appearing.' For the rest, the entries reveal the underlying conviction to be found associated with Novalis' virtual identification of Sophie with religion, in the special sense the word came to have for him. 'She is dead—consequently I shall die—the world is empty', he wrote in June. 'With her, the entire world is dead for me. I belong to the earth no more'. In a note written at about this time, Novalis declared: 'What I feel for Sœfchen is religion, not love. All absolute love, independent of the heart and founded on faith, is religion.' This faith of Novalis, as expressed in the concluding Hymns, conceives Night above all as the nuptial night wherein animus (the poet) and anima (the beloved) are at last reunited in an eternal embrace.

(V)

Underlying almost all that Novalis ever wrote, whether lyrical or speculative, from the Lehrlinge zu Sais onwards, two predominant themes are discernible: the 'doctrine of correspondences', and the process of initiation. 'Towards the interior leads the mysterious road. Within us, or nowhere, lies eternity with all its worlds, the past and the future.' This inner world, or microcosm, is inherent in and inseparable from the macrocosm of the physical universe; and each reflects the other. With this conception is concomitant the doctrine of correspondences as expressed by, for instance, Cornelius Agrippa when he wrote in his Occult Philosophy\(^1\) that 'there is no member in man that hath not correspondence with some sign, star, intelligence, divine name,
sometimes in God himself, the Archetype'. Novalis’ observation that ‘the human is a source of analogies for the universe’ reveals his outlook as being fundamentally at one with that of such predecessors as Agrippa, Paracelsus, and no doubt above all Boehme. In a fragment to be found in his ‘Encyclopedic project’ of 1798–99, Novalis noted, under the rubric Magic (Mystic Philology), that ‘sympathy of the sign with the signified was one of the fundamental ideas of the Kabbalah’. Similarly, under the heading Grammar, he observed that ‘Man is not alone in speaking: the universe also speaks – everything speaks. – Unending languages. The doctrine of signatures.’ And in declaring that ‘the greatest good resides in the imagination’, Novalis, knowingly or not, was echoing Paracelsus, according to whom ‘Imagination is Creative Power . . . Imagination takes precedence over all. Resolute imagination can accomplish all things.’

The numerous and diverse fragments scattered like pollen by Novalis during the brief course of his creative life show him to have been gifted above all with intuitive power of a prodigious order. The three more substantial works culminating in the ‘Hymns to the Night’ show the development of this intuitive follower of the Hermetic path to have been essentially that of an initiate. It is clear that the author of the ‘Hymns’ is a neophyte who has undergone an experience leading him through confrontation with the reality of death, when his beloved is taken from him as Euridice was taken from Orpheus, to a new understanding and evaluation of this reality, identifying death with restorative Night. In the words of Mircea Eliade, referring to the mythic darkness corresponding to the cosmic Night, to the chaos before creation: ‘we are dealing here with a double symbolism: that of death, namely the conclusion of a temporal existence, and consequently with the end of time, and the symbolism of return to the germinal mode of being, which precedes all forms and every temporal existence.’ Eliade further points out that initiatory death is a recommencement, never an end, and that it is the condition sine qua non of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration, the beginning of a new life. It is surely significant that Ludwig Tieck should have ended his eulogy of Novalis by declaring him comparable ‘among the moderns’, only with ‘the sublime Dante’. Just as Dante’s vita nuova proceeded from

2 Interpretatio alia Totius Astronomiae, 1659
his loss and vision of Beatrice, so the death and transfiguration celebrated in the 'Hymns to the Night' are inseparable from Novalis' betrothal to Sophie. As the Hymns move towards their climax, the figure that was Sophie seems to emerge implicitly from their ethereal, all-coalescing flux as at once Isis, the immortal Virgin symbolizing the purity of Nature before the Fall, and Sophia, the wisdom concomitant with illumination.

There is a tradition according to which the spiritual history of humanity is the supreme initiation, by means of which the Saviour of the World redeems mankind from separation from our true Self, the Godhead. The two concluding 'Hymns to the Night' evoke an account of the withdrawal of the gods of the ancient world, following the disappearance of primordial Faith and Imagination, into the Night of slumbering latency. The birth of a new age is eventually heralded by the birth of the 'only Son of the first Virgin Mother'. Novalis then narrates the Gospel story in his own glimmeringly colourful language. A Singer, 'born under the sky of ancient Greece', arrives in Palestine to salute the miraculous Child, while declaring Death to be the path of Eternal Life: Du bist der tod und machst uns erst gesund. There follows a rhapsodic transcription of the passion, resurrection and ascension of Christ (whose name is never more than implied). The remains of the old world are left behind in the open tomb, while the inexhaustible chalice of a future golden age is proffered from on high. Long centuries pass, death ceases to be fearful, the new creation lives in ever-renewed splendour; and the penultimate Hymn ends in seven strophes of rejoicing, beginning with the words:

"Raised is the stone -
'Mankind is resurrected -'

The final Hymn, Sehnsucht nach dem Tode, makes more explicit the conviction expressed in the fifth, that Death is the passage to eternal life, that Night restores to us all that day has taken away, and that night is preferable to day as death to life. The supposition that the poet's personal experience has its equivalent not only in the experience of each man in particular but also in that of humanity in general, endorsed by the work's concluding strophes, bears out the interpretation of it that would maintain it to be a record of initiation into a Vita Nuova. It would be false to regard Novalis as turning to the Night out of despair.
He was like the wise Nichodemus of Henry Vaughan who

'saw such light
As made him know his God by night',

and knew there to be in God 'a deep but dazzling darkness.' He in fact found in the everyday, natural world a subject of endless wonder and fascination, as all the Fragments arising from his absorption in scientific studies testify. Through the death of Sophie which overtook him in the midst of them he came to experience the profound inseparability of love and faith. The Hymns are an expression of spontaneous faith without parallel in the contemporary world: faith rare as a grain of wheat preserved in some prehistoric sarcophagus, yet still manifestly capable of germination.
Hymns to the Night

NOVALIS

I

Who is there among living, sense-endowed beings that does not, amidst all the wondrous manifestations filling the vast space surrounding him, respond lovingly above all to light, the joy of all — with her colours, her beams and waves, her gentle ubiquitousness daily arousing all that exists? She is life's intimate essence, the element breathed in by the huge world of the stars tirelessly swimming and dancing in her azure tide — by the sparkling, ever immobile stone, the pensive plant absorbed in drawing up moisture, and the tameless, refulgent, multiformed beast — but above all the superb stranger with the all-embracing eyes, buoyant of bearing and with delicately closed melodic lips. As a monarch of terrestrial nature, she summons every force to innumerable transformations, binds and unites unending alliances, hanging her heavenly likeness about each terrestrial substance. Her presence alone reveals the kingdoms of this world to us in all their miraculous splendour.

I turn away from her down towards the holy, ineffable, mysterious Night. Far away lies the world — engulfed in a yawning abyss — waste and solitary is its domain. Deep sadness rouses an ache in my breast. I would I could sink down to mingle myself like dewdrops with ashes. — Remotenesses of retrospection, youth's longings, childhood's dreams, the brief joys, the evanescent hopes of one's whole life arise, clad in grey like evening's mists after sunset. Light's caravan has moved on to set up its joyous tents elsewhere. Can it be that it might never return to her children awaiting her here with innocent trust?

What is this sudden presentiment swelling in my heart to stifle the soft breath of melancholy? Do you too still, darkened Night, nurture kindness towards us? What is it, invisible and potent, that passes from under your cloak about my soul? A precious panacea drips from the bunch of poppies in your hand. You give an upward lift to the spirit's

Hymns I and II are translated by David Gascoyne; III, IV, V and VI by Jeremy Reed, from literal translations by Peter Pelz.
weighty wings. Obscure and ineffable feelings transport us – with joyful apprehension I behold a grave countenance leaning down to gaze with gracious devotion upon me, and beneath endless convolutions of curls the Mother appears in her lovable youth. How lacking and childish the light seems to me now – how cheering a boon the departure of day! – So only on this account, because Night separates your devotees from you, do you sow the expanses of space with luminous spheres – to proclaim your omnipotence – to announce your return – at the time of your withdrawal. Empyreal seem, like yonder glinting stars, the illimitable eyes that Night unseals within us. Their gaze reaches even further than the palest of the countless starry hosts – can see with Light’s aid into the deepest recesses of a loving heart – filling with unutterable rapture the loftiest space of all. Praise to the world’s Queen, majestic messenger of transcendent realms, the guardian angel of all blissful love – she sends you to me – tender beloved – adorable sun of the Night – now that I am alert – and am thus both thine and mine – you have revealed to me the Night as being one with Life itself – you have made of me an integrated man. Consume my body in your spiritual fire, so that my aerial essence may be intimately mingled with you in an everlasting nuptial night.

II

Must morning ever reappear? Earthly powers ever reign? An impious bustle dispels the heavenly tints of Night’s approach. Can love’s secret sacrifice not burn eternally? Light has a limited duration; but Night’s dominion transcends time and place. – Eternal is the continuity of sleep. – Blessed sleep – bless not too seldom with thy bliss the faithful devotees of Night. Only fools fail to feel gratitude to you, knowing no sleep but that compassionately cast at dusk by the shade precursive of true Night. They are not sensitive to your presence in the golden juice of grapes, the almond’s wondrous oil, the brown sap of the poppy pod. They are unaware that you are hovering about maidens’ bosoms, to make a heaven amidst their breasts – unsuspecting that, arising from the most immemorial legends, you appear in order to disclose the heavens to us, bearer of the key that opens the abode of the blessed, mute messenger of immortal mysteries.
III

Once, when I shed bitter tears, when my hope was dissolved through pain, and I stood alone on a barren hill, which hid the shape of my life in a narrow dark space, — solitary as becomes the visionary, I was driven by desperation to review the insignificance of my life.

— As I looked around for help, unable to go forward or turn back, I hung on in torment to the thread of my precarious life, until from the blue distances, from the experiences derived from my past life, there came a vibration, which with one pulse severed the birth-cord — the chain of light. Earthly treasures disappeared, and with it my sadness — pain entered a new unrooted world — you, night-inspiration, heaven's sleep, came over me — the place around me levitated; and over this region my released and reborn spirit hovered. The hill became a cloud of dust — and through the cloud I saw the transfigured features of my love. In those eyes rested eternity — I took those hands, and my tears became a glittering galaxy. The future opened, and aeons disappeared into the distance, like a travelling storm. With her I contemplated the prospect of a new life. — It was the first and only dream — and from then on I've felt immutable trust in the night-heaven, and its bride, the light.

IV

Now I know when the last morning will be — when the light will no longer intrude on night and love — and when sleep will always become one uninterrupted dream. My pilgrimage to the holy grave was exhausting, the cross unmanageable. The crystal wave, inaudible to lesser senses, wells up in the hill's dark hollow, at the foot of which the terrestrial tide ebbs, and whoever tastes it, whoever's stood on the world's threshold, and looked over into the promised land into night's dwelling, truly that person won't return to the ways of the world, and to the place where light's in a perpetual motion of unrest.

Up there he builds shelters, places of rest, has desires and loves, keeps watch until a propitious hour draws him down into the source of the fountain, but what became holy through the touch of love, flows freely through concealed channels to the other side where its fragrance disperses like love become sleep.

And you, lively light, reactivate the day, dispensing your radiant life in me — but you won't tempt me away from the rimed gravestone of memory. With pleasure I'll stir my busy hands, observe where I may be
needed — celebrating the full measure of your radiance — undiscouraged, pursue the marvellous connections of your art — gladly watch the swift course of your shining clockface — penetrate the symmetry of your powers, and the laws governing the exchange of endless space and time. But my secret heart remains true to the night, and creative love, her daughter. Can’t you show me a heart that will always be true to me? Does your sun have friendly eyes that recognize me, and do your stars form a bracelet for my hand? Return a gentle pressure and a comforting word. Have you embellished the night with colours and subtle contour — or was it she that afforded your jewels a deeper meaning? What ecstasy, what pleasure does your life offer that counterbalances death’s mystery? Don’t the colours of the night contain all that inspires us? It cloaks you like a mother; and you reflect its mutations. You would disappear into yourself — vanishing in endless space, should her hold release you, she who ignites you to flame out for the world.

Truly I was before you existed — the mother sent me with progeny to inhabit the world, to enlighten it with love, to plant flowers so that it would be a monument for all time. These inspired thoughts haven’t matured yet, and the traces of our revelation are few. One day your clock will point to the end, and you’ll become one with us, and your extinction will be marked by your desire to live. I feel in myself the end of your strife: heavenly freedom, fortuitous return. With wild anguish I recognize how distant we are from our home, and I sense your resistance to the old, star-shot heaven. Your rage and fury are to no purpose. The cross stands invincible — victory banner of our race.

I shall float over,
and then each pain
is half-barbed with pleasure.
Just for a short time
I’ll be free,
to engage ecstatically
in love’s drunken lap.
Power will ignite me,
a stream of energy,
as I look down
on you from above.
On the hill-top your glow
will vanish, a shadow
bring the cooling wreath.
Possess me, Love,
without restraint,
so I can pass through sleep
to love again.
I feel death's energising stream
turn my blood to balm and ether —
I live by day
with faith and courage,
and each night I expire
in sacred fire.

V

Over the evolving branches of mankind there ruled for aeons an implacable power. A dark planet induced fear in man. The earth was the seat of the council of the gods and their home. Their mysterious residence here was from the beginning. Over the scarlet mountains at dawn, in the depths of the sea, there lived the sun, the inextinguishable, living light.

An old giant supported the world. Safe under the mountains lay the first sons of the earth; impotent in their rage to oppose the new race of gods, and their chosen successors. The ocean's dark green depths nurtured the goddess. An exuberant race multiplied in the crystal grottoes. Rivers, trees, flowers and animals had human sense. The wine was sweeter for being poured by youth — a god in the vine — a loving, maternal goddess, exploding out of the depths in gold — love's divine intoxication, a libation to the loveliest wife of the gods — a colourful festival of heaven's children, and those on earth became drunk with existence, an upwelling of spring. All races honoured, child-like, the contained, thousand-fold flame as the highest aspiration. But one thought remained, one terrifying dream image.

The nightmare disrupted the table, projecting terror in its wake, testing the ingenuity of the gods to remain stable; the monster's savage rampage revealed an implacable rage, for it was death who intervened, an ogre at the party.
That presence exorcised the good
configured in the blood,
divided parties shipwrecked here
couldn’t find the stimulus
to resist the impotent
concession to the black flood,
every wave of pleasure broken
on a rock-like obduracy.

With unceasing temerity,
man compliments his own death,
a youth faces extinction,
turns out the light on his breath.
Memory of exacting pain
dies in the soot-fall of the night,
the riddle’s unsolved, the godhead
keeps the enigma of the dead.

The old world relinquished its hold. The young tribe’s pleasure garden
frittered to weed – and there was an exodus of people into the desert.
The gods and their retinue disappeared – nature grew desolate. An iron
chain stamped grooves in its aridity. The blood-pulse of life was
discredited in dark woods – dust on the breeze. Every allegiance
vanished, with its protean twin, imagination. A hostile north wind cut
across the frozen plain, destroying the green leaf. Space filled up with
pulsing constellations. Into a spatial recess, into rarefied emotions, the
world’s spirit withdrew to await the dawn of a new world. The light no
longer signified the council of the gods – they lived in perpetual night.

Night became the chrysalis of revelations – the gods retreated into it,
fell asleep, then deployed themselves like fireflies over the changed
world. And among those, who rejected early maturity, and who were
obdurate to the spirit of youth, the new world appeared as an
unknown phenomenon. In the desacralized poetic tabernacle – a son
of the first virgin and mother – joined in the vortex of a mystic embrace.
The orient’s occult wisdom was the first to recognise the beginning of
the new time. – A star pointed to the king’s humble cradle. In honour of
futurity, nature offered its fragrant sun-shower to him. Solitary, the
word disclosed a new discourse directed towards the father’s star-
crown, and came to rest in the mother’s prophetic sanctum. The child’s
precognition lit up the future with fire – inheriting the supernal from
his godly stem, and unconcerned about his station on earth. He
attracted to him a circle of those concerned with inner love and its dynamism. A cult grew up like flowers around him. The inexhaustible world, the most brilliant of messages, fell like star-ignited sparks from his lips. From far shores, born under Greece's azure skies, a singer came to Palestine, and offered his song to the miraculous child:

You're the youth who through the ages
has stood contemplating our graves:
A comforting sign in the darkness –
a hopeful start to new humanity . . .
What plunged us in a vortex of despair,
now draws us eagerly to the surface.
Eternal life has been revealed in death,
and you are death, the circle's unity.

The singer passed on his way to Hindustan – his heart tired with love, and translated the experience into poetry under a blue sky, so that all who heard came to him, and news of the word multiplied. Shortly after the singer's departure, he was the victim of man's fall. He died young, extracted from the world he loved, separated from the grief of his mother and his friends. The dead mouth emptied the dark chalice of suffering. – The hour of the new world's birth grew imminent, and was accompanied by universal dread. The void rang out with the instinctive terror of death. – The pressure of the old world weighed on him. After a reunion with his mother, the daimon released him into sleep. For a few days mist obscured the stormy sea, and people migrated across the quaking fissures. – The mystery was unsealed – heavenly spirits lifted the ancient stone from the dark tomb. Angels materialized out of the sleeper's dreams. Restored to numinous godhead – he levitated to the heights of the new world – buried with his own hands the body of the old world in the vacated tomb, and set a stone on it that no cosmic force could lift.

And still they offer gratitude at your grave – fearfully surprised to see you resurrected, and their own hopes embodied in you; and see you again stoop to your mother's breast, conversing seriously with friends, speaking words which grew on the tree of life; then you're hurrying to secure your father's arm, messenger who brings the chalice to the new humanity with its golden future. The mother quickly returns to you – for she is the first to be with you in your new home. And with the rapid march of time, your creation excels in beauty – and those who come to
you are free of pain, and in their conviction follow you and the holy
virgin through the province of love — serving in death's temple and are
yours for eternity.

The stone is lifted —
humanity's risen —
we all remain yours
without being chosen.
Anxiety burns
in your golden basin,
when earthly life softens
at the last supper.

Death presides at the wedding,
the lamps burn brightly —
the virgins form a ring,
oil's in abundance.
May the distance resound
with your procession,
and the eloquent stars
acquire human discourse.

To you, Mary,
all impulse rises,
in their illusory
life they search for you.
They wish the electric
spark in the high blue;
your offering sanctuary
of your divinity.

So many consumed by flame,
engendered by their torment,
and in flight from the world,
turned towards your name.
Desperate in their need,
your presence instilled calm,
now they form a chain
of the ever present.

Those who lovingly believe,
show defiance to the grave.
Such a gift is permanent,
and not spirited away.
To assuage his need,
and inspire him there's the night —
his heart will be watched over
by children of the light.
Comforted, life moves
into infinity;
by an inner chemistry,
the senses are transformed.
The galactic sky-roof
will pour the gold elixir,
wine that will transfigure
us to the light of stars.

Love is freely given,
there’s no valediction,
life transmits the energy
of a tireless sea.
Just one night of ecstasy —
one durable poem —
and our sun in space,
mirrors God’s own face.

With anxious longing our eyes search
through the dark of the night.
And in this temporality,
we’re for ever unfulfilled.
when it comes, our homeward flight,
we will see the holy time.

What prevents us our return,
those we loved, have long been dead?
Our life’s journey dies with them,
fear makes us doubly alert.
Nothing here should occupy,
the heart’s full, the world empty.

Already the vibrancy
flickers through us, the mystery
of an echo in the sky,
resonating in the gulf.
Those we miss are signalling
with their breath; it’s time to go.

Now we’ll meet the star-bride,
Jesus, and his company. —
Comfort is this grey twilight
for those broken by their grief.
A dream will loose us to the tide,
and sink us in the father’s womb.
VI

Longing for Death

In the regions underground
where the light can't penetrate,
raging pain, the upward bound,
points to our happy departure.
Swiftly in a little boat,
we've arrived at heaven's shore.

Praise to the unending night,
and praise to its sister, sleep.
Scorched by the day's anxiety,
we wear marks of stress.
All that we had hoped to see
is less than our father's home.

What should we do in this world now,
with our love and faith?
The old things have been put aside,
the new offer no advance.
Those are most desperately lost
who will back the receding tide.

Those former times, when the senses
burnt brightly in leaping flame,
then it was humanity
knew the father's face and name,
and vision with its purity
answered to his precepts.

The past, when ancient branches
were fed by rich primeval blood,
and children looked to the star-flood
with longing for their death,
and hearts broke even when the voice
of life initiated joy.

The past, when in the fire of youth
God showed himself to the earth,
and devoted to the truth,
followed to an early death,
refused to repudiate fear,
and through pain was loved by us.
On Novalis and the Night

SALAH STÉTIÉ

Poetry is consubstantially linked with death. The pulsing throb runs on from night to night – the vibration of utterance. But what is the night? She is at first the daughter of astonishment: yes, confronted by the profundity of being and its impalpable unity, the spirit is struck with astonishment – and no less astonished that, enigma following enigma, there should exist this fragile and unyielding point, this ferric beauty. Night is that which at once incites and confounds wonder by purveying mysteries and justifications as a distinct whole. Yes, rather the justification than the explanation, this is where poetry’s ultimate basis may be found. Thus the universe is presented to us, at a stroke, as a totality to be elucidated, and, the mediation of the night (which was at the origin of the poem) having supervened, it now transpires that most evident of all is that absence of light which permits the totality to persist as such and the elucidation to conserve its force intact and its power radiant at the heart of triumphant night. Such transition of night to light and return of light to the midst of night represents the poetic cycle: an allegory perhaps of the natural cycle of which the least volatile spirit is an instillation. The problem for poetry is to reveal that the spirit’s venture, all desirous though it may be of bonds and links in the world’s complexity, that this venture is not, for poetry, in the least iconoclastic: that it does not fracture the simplicity of anticipated, dreamed of simplicity of being, our own image. What poetry discovers while aiming at the conquest of night and that it brings back from its wide sounding explorations is something other than an ineffectual idol relating to the use of language: a living fragment of the sum total. This totality, illumined by the dim lamp of our desire, desire concerning which we understand moreover nothing, whatever hypothesis we may risk regarding its particulars and circumstances, is a nocturnal whole. From the very beginning, it is only thus that has been manifested the fascination exerted by the night over spirits enamoured of a certainty.

Pages translated by David Gascoyne from Ur en poésie, Stock, 1980.
other than partial and as it were of another nature. Night is symbolic not only of our vow, undertaken by reason of Novalis and the community of his brothers, in all the tongues spoken at Saïs and elsewhere. Much rather is it for the word, ever since the first Books of the dead, the only way and the only approach to the real substance of him who must successfully be rejoined once the day’s object is resolved, rejoined beyond the diurnal illusion of an Egypt whose name properly signifies ‘darkness’.

Perhaps this also must be noted: that the night, which brings all things together again, is the projection lived by us of the primordial experience of oneness with the mother, who once contained and hid us all. We will have inwardly apprehended that real body which was the mother’s to the point of identifying ourselves with it, yet knowing it the while to be vaster than ourselves and far more mysterious and capable than we are. While being able to gauge the extent of this body’s finitude, through it, O cloud, we achieve the intuition that somewhere, at once set free and setting free, another dimension is possible. The night: our biological boundlessness and all that is organic in us, which we have such difficulty in gaining access to, even through the intervention of the imaginary, our whole share of the organic proves and guarantees, it, maternal gold. Far more so do we find ourselves through this buried gold subtly guaranteed; guaranteed and assayed. Before being the perturbed night I designated as that of the distraught pursuit of the real body – unattainable object of so many works of poetry – among which the Hymns of Novalis remain the most resplendent, the night is the hot-house wherein this body was once granted and pledged to us. Here we see how this body, and its night, condition us on all the paths marked out for us to follow, at once the dim evoked lamp and the pole-star by means of which we find out where we are. Should this guiding mark be lacking, the heart and the body become afflicted with distress, consciousness experiences its vulnerable frailty, its hurtful detachment and the uncertainty by which it is worn out. Then assurance which was given us at the outset, that vast and generous promised body, must be pursued our whole lives long through bodies and women; also, without any doubt, through the inverted sign of the night in the words elicited from us in prospect of a dwelling.

And I declare it perilous.
NOVALIS

Translated by Vernon Watkins

Spiritual Songs

4.

From a thousand happy hours
Found in all this life of ours
One alone to me stayed true,
One, when through the pains it suffered
I in my own heart discovered
Who had died for me, yes, who.

All my world was lying shattered.
Like the bloom a worm had entered,
Heart and blossom withered, sere;
In the grave lay each ambition
With my life's entire possession,
And for grief was I still here.

As I lay in secret pining,
Always wept, away inclining,
Still subsisting but by fear,
All, as from above, was rifted,
Suddenly the gravestone lifted,
And my inmost self made clear.

Whom I saw, and glimpsed entire
By his hand, let none enquire;
This forever I'll now see;
And, of all life's hours, only
This, like my own wounds, will show me
Ageless joy, and open be.
Though all become unfaithful,
Yet faithful I will stay,
That constancy be grateful,
Nor die on Earth away.
For me they made you suffer,
For me in pain you died;
Then gladly and for ever
I give you my heart's pride.

Your death compels me often
To weep that bitter wrong,
And many a one you govern
Forgets you his life long.
By love alone pervaded,
Such great works you have done,
And yet your fame has faded
And no-one thinks thereon.

Full of true love, still reigning,
You stand at each man's side;
Were none to you remaining,
Still true you would abide.
The truest love wins over;
We feel it finally,
Weep, and like children cover
Our faces at your knee.

I in my soul have found you:
O do not part from me;
Let me, in all that bound you
To me, stay constantly.
Once more their eyes in vision
My brothers heavenward dart,
And sink in love's submission,
And fall against your heart.
Couplets

I.
Gay let the dragonflies glide, they that are innocent strangers,
Following the Dioscuri, this way and that way, with gifts.

II.
One was successful: he lifted the veil of the goddess at Saïs.
What did he see, then? — He saw — wonder of wonders — himself.

III.
Friends, the soil is poor; bountiful seeds we must scatter,
Are we to set our hope even on moderate crops.

IV.
World-building does not suffice the mind whose motive runs deeper:
Yet a heart by its love appeases the labouring soul.

V.
Princes are ciphers: their worth is nothing alone, but with figures
Which they by favour exalt, close to them, they are worth much.

VI.
Suppositions are nets which he alone catches who flings them;
Was not through supposition even America found?
Put supposition then high, and before all else, for alone it
Stays everlastingly new, fast as it conquers itself.

VII.
Is it not wise for the night to seek a convivial sick-bed?
Then, man is wisely disposed: even the sleepers he loves.
Know Yourself

The need to know's a singular obsession—
men seek that knowledge under diverse names,
but it's elusive, small intimations
lead to a still deeper obscurity.
Once it is rumoured that a poet came
who had the key to the hidden palace,
he anatomized his secret with myths
that children understood,
but ages pass, consigned to boundaries
men couldn't see the gold crown in the wood,
the myth dispersed and with it clarity
of perception.
Fortunate alone is he whose alchemy
permits illumination of the self,
his fire
composes flames that make the spirit dance,
his word is gold and it's oracular,
he is the king, his blinding Delphic star
sears him with Know your Self: he has come far.

(Freiberg, 11 May 1798)
Know thyself

One thing only there is that man at all times has sought;
   Everywhere, now in the heights, now in the world's lowest depths -
Under many names - in vain - it conceals itself always,
   Always he could feel it - yet never was he able to grasp it.
Long ago lived a man who in pleasing myths showed the children
   The road, and the key to the hidden castle.
Few found out for themselves the easy cipher of liberation,
   But the few were already Masters of the design.
Long ages passed by - Error sharpened the sense in us -
   Till the myth itself, for us, no longer hid the truth.
Happy the man who has attained knowledge,
   Who eagerly seeks wisdom's precious stone in himself.
Only the man of intellect is the true Adept - he transmutes
   Everything into living gold - he no longer has need of elixirs.
Within his heart the holy pelican exhales its dews - the King is within him -
   Likewise Delphi itself, he finally grasps the legend 'Know thyself'.

Freiburg, 11 Mai 1798
For Tieck

A child of sorrows and of constancy,
An exile in an alien land,
Gladly he ignored the glinting novelties,
Clung to ancestral things.

After long searching, long expectancy,
After many a check, many a blind alley,
He found in an abandoned garden
On a bench long since collapsed

An ancient book with golden clasps
With words in it no one had heard before;
And like the tender buds of spring
There grew in him an inner sense.

And as he sits and reads and gazes
Into the crystal of the new world,
On grass and stars renews himself,
And full of thanks falls on his knees.

Out of the grass and herbs there gently rises
An old man deep in thought,
In a plain robe, and with serene face
Draws near the loving child.

Familiar yet impenetrable are the features,
So childlike and so wonderful;
The springtime air of the cradle
Rarely plays in silver hairs.

Trembling the child clutches the old man's hands,
It is the exalted spirit of the book
Who shows the bitter pilgrimage's goal
To him, and his father's home.

'You kneel on my deserted grave',
Thus opens the holy mouth;
'You are the heir to my possessions,
May God's profundity be made known to you.
'On that hill as a poor boy
I saw a heavenly book,
And then through that gift was able
To see into all creatures.

'Through God's grace many miraculous things
Have happened to me;
The secret Ark of the New Testament
With my own eyes I have seen stand open.

'I faithfully wrote down
What inner joy revealed to me,
And I was misunderstood and remained poor
Till I was called to God.

'The time there is when the Mystery
Must no longer be hidden.
Tomorrow in this book
Breaks irresistibly into time.

'Apostle of divine Aurora,
Herald of freedom shall you be,
Soft as the air in flute and harp
I breathe my breath into you.

'God be with you! Go now and wash
Your eyes in morning dew.
Be true to the Book and to my memory,
Bathe yourself in the eternal azure.

'You shall proclaim the final reign
Which will last a thousand years;
You will find an inspired being,
And see Jacob Böhme again.'
You are cold and tired, stranger, you seem not
Used to this sky - warmer airs blow
To your homeland, and freer
In time's past rose the young breast.

Did not eternal spring there scatter on quiet fields
Life's vivid colours around her? Did not Peace there
Spin firm tapestries? Did not what once
Grew there, bloom everlastingly?

Ah, but you seek in vain - that heavenly land
Has sunk in the abyss - no mortal
Knows the path, inaccessible seas
Cover it over unceasingly.

Few yet and only those of your breed
Have dispelled the flood - hither and thither their seed
Is sown and they wait for
A better time in reunion.

With a good will follow me - a favourable destiny
Has led you here - companions are assembled
Here now in tranquillity,
Tonight in the household feast.

Lighter already lifts up your look - truly, the evening
Will pass by quickly for you like a friendly dream,
When in sweet conversation your heart
Melts to the good people there.

See now, - the Stranger is here - he who feels himself exiled
From the same country as you; heavy indeed
The hours have weighed on him - the joyful time
For him drew early to a close.

Willing enough though he tarries if he meets good fellows,
Will join merrily in in homely celebrations;
Him that spring season delights that blossoms
Ever fresh round the father and mother.
That today's feast may yet often return
Before the mother regretfully takes her leave
Of the weeping ones and on nocturnal paths
Follows the guide into the fatherland —

That the magician shall not yield ground, who blesses
The bond of your alliance — and that those who are farther removed
Shall enjoy it and tread
A road of rejoicing with you —

This the Guest wishes — but the Poet says it
To you for him; he is fain to keep silent, when
He feels content and just so he yearns
For his own far-off Beloved.

Stay kindly disposed to the Stranger – sparse the joys here below
Counted out to him – yet with such friendly
Beings he sees past unwavering
To the great Birthday.

22nd January 1798

Spiritual Songs XV

I see you in a thousand images,
Painted or carved, Maria, all beautiful.
Yet your true likeness none of them can seize
As I do the original stamped in my soul.

I only know, life at sixes and sevens
For me now is a thing of the past.
And an indescribably sweet heaven
Reigns in my heart.
Last Love

And so, one more contented look at the end of the pilgrimage
Before the gate of the wood lightly closes behind me.
Brimful of gratitude let me accept Love's beckoning sign, the faithful companion,
With a joyful mind and open my heart to her.
She has directed my steps through life, my one and only counsellor,
Here is all the merit if I have followed the good,
If many a tender heart sorrows after the early departed,
And if for the proven man all hopes fade with me.
Still as the child in sweet presentiment of powers unfolding,
Truly as Sunday's child stepped into his seventh spring,
Love with a light hand touched the young bosom,
Womanly graces richly adorn that past.
As out of sleep the mother wakes her darling with a kiss,
As he first looks on her he makes himself understood,
So Love was with me – through her I first knew the world,
Myself found myself and became what a man as a lover will be.
What up to that time was only a childhood game
Now became serious business, nor did she ever leave me, –
Doubt and a restless spirit often tried to estrange me from her,
At length came the day that completed her schooling.
Which gave me my destiny in the form of the Beloved, and made me
Free forever and certain of an unending bliss.
The Dying Genius

Welcome, dear friend, for the last time now
Hear my voice, – the time for my departure has come.
   I have found what I sought,
   Sorcery's cords are falling from off me.

Beauty's own essence – you see now the Queen –
Breaks all the spells; long years in vain
   I chased from throne to throne, at last now
   The ancient port, through her, signals me back.

The secret embers of my ancient being
Blaze up irresistibly, deep in my form
   Of earth: you shall be sacrificial priest
   And sing the song of return.

Take these twigs, cover me over with them,
Then into the East sing the exalted song,
   Till the sun comes up kindling its splendours,
   Throwing wide the gates of the original world.

The fragrance of the veil, which enveloped me before,
Sinks then in golden lights over the plains,
   And he who breathes of it will swear in ecstasy
   Eternal love of the beautiful princess.

* 'genius': the reader should try to shut out the common idea of 'the genius' typical of the 19th century and after, and think more in terms of the individual creative spirit, the unique being. As genius loci, so genius personae.
Friends, the ground is poor; we must strew abundant seed that we might nonetheless reap a modest harvest.

1 We seek everywhere the Absolute, and always find only things.

2 The designation through tone and line is a wonderful abstraction. Three letters designate the word ‘God’; a single line reveals a million things. How free becomes the operation of the universe here; how vivid the concentricity of the spirit-world! One command mobilizes the armies; a word affects the freedom of nations.

Addenda, 15 We are waking up when we dream that we are dreaming.

16 Imagination spawns the future world either in the realms above us or in the realms below us, or in our metempsychosis towards ourselves. We dream of journeys through the cosmos: isn’t the cosmos then in ourselves? The depths of our spirits we know not. – Toward the Interior goes the arcane way. In us, or nowhere, is the Eternal with its worlds, the past and future. The outer world is a shadow world, which casts its shadow into the realm of light. Now it shines, to be sure, inside us as darkness, solitary and formless, but how utterly different will it appear when this darkening is past and the shadow-body is passed over. We enjoy it more each time because our spirit has been deprived.

18 To what extent can a human being have a sense for something, when he doesn’t have the embryo of it inside him? Whatever I come to understand must itself develop organically in me, and what I seem to learn is only nourishment and cultivation of that inner organism.
21 Genius is the capacity to treat imaginary objects as real, and even to manipulate them as such. The talent of describing, of observing exactly -- appropriate for describing one's observations -- is distinct from genius. Without this talent, however, one sees only half, and is only half genius; one can have a capacity for genius which never comes to be developed due to a deficiency of these talents.

28 The highest duty of education is to take possession of one's transcendental self, to conjoin in the I, its Is. For so few, strangely, is there a need for a complete sense of and understanding for another. Apart from complete self-knowledge, one never truly learns to understand another.

24 Self-renunciation is the source of all abasement, just as it is the ground of all true exaltation. The first step is to gaze into the Interior-secluding contemplation of oneself. Whoever remains here has attained only half. The second step must be to actively gaze outward, in a steady, spontaneous observation of the outer world.

38 Now the spirit stirs only here and there: when will the spirit stir the Whole? When will humanity begin to remember itself?

42 We cling to lifeless matter because of its connections, its solid form. We love matter insofar as it is connected with the beloved Essence, insofar as those traces reach, or insofar as the material object resembles or reflects the Beloved.

Addenda, 50A The transcendental viewpoint for this life awaits us -- only from it does life prove to be genuinely significant.

51 Every beloved object is a focus of a paradise.

66 All which befalls our lives is material, from which we can make what we will. Whoever has more spirit, makes more from his life. Each acquaintance, each occurrence, becomes from the spiritual vista the first movement of an unending progression, beginning an unending novel (romans).

101 Mythology holds the history of the archetypal world, which contains past, present and future.
If one intends to speak of something secret with a few others, when one is in a greater, diffused society, and the group is not close together, then one must discourse in an extraordinary language. This extraordinary language can either be in overtones, or after the image of a foreign language. The latter proves to be a metaphorical or cryptic language.

Whatever one loves, one finds everywhere, and everywhere sees resemblances and analogies to it. The greater one's love, the vaster and more meaningful is this analogous world. My beloved is the abbreviation of the universe, the universe an elongation, an extrapolation of my beloved. The friend of the knowledgeable offers all flowers and gifts to his beloved.

The ancient hypothesis that the comets were flames from revolutions in planetary systems holds true, certainly, for another kind of comet, which periodically revolutionizes and rejuvenates the spiritual world-system. In such cases, the spiritual astronomer notes for some time the influx of such a comet into an important component of the spiritual planets which we term humanity. Mighty floods, changes in climate, variations in the centre of gravity, general tendencies to flee; singular meteors are the cause of these violent incidents, the effect of which is that a new world-age is created.

As it is necessary, perhaps, that in certain periods all is brought forth in flux, inevitably mixed, and a newer, purer crystallization arises, so is it essential that something moderate this crisis, and hinder the planet's total dissolution. Therefore a core remains, a kernel, in order that the new mass crystallise, and about it new, beautiful forms arise. The solids draw firmly together, the overflowing heated masses diminish, and one spares no remedy to forestall the softening of the bones, the unravelling of the fibres and tissues.

Would it not be madness to make a permanent crisis, and to trust the feverish condition over the truly healthy state, the preservation of which all must favour? Whoever desires to prolong such a state in crisis — doubt his beneficence, and his efficacy.

Doesn't the King prove to be so through the intimate touch of His Worth?
That everywhere the Highest, the Universal, and the Obscure are at play, and that every inquiry soon hits upon dark and obscure thoughts, is certain.

I. Poeticism

Poetry dissolves foreign existences into itself.

Poetry is the great art of constructing the transcendental wholeness. The poet is also a transcendental physician. Poetry rules and governs with pleasure and pain – with lust and aversion – error and truth – health and sickness – she mingles all to further her great aim of aims – the exaltation of man above himself.

When one reads correctly, there unfolds then in our interior a real, visible world according to the words.

The sorcerer is a poet. The prophet is to the sorcerer as the man of taste is to the poet.

The primal art is hieroglyphic.

Body, soul and spirit are the elements of the world – as epic, lyric and drama are the elements of poetry.

All novels where genuine love is presented are fairy-tales – magical events.

The urgency of all artworks.

The lives of cultured people should alternate between music and non-music, as between sleep and waking.

The sense for poetry has much in common with the sense for mysticism. It is the sense for the characteristic, the personal, the unknown, the mysterious, the manifest, the necessary accident. It describes the indescribable. It sees the invisible, feels the imperceptible, and so forth.
II. Logological Fragments

53 In the world we search for a design — this design is we ourselves. — What are we? Personifications, omnipotent points.

59 The true philosophical act is the slaying of the self; this is the real beginning of all philosophy, therein lies the requirement for all philosophic youths, and only this act answers all criteria and conditions for the transcendental deed.

63 Energy is the substance of matter, of the elements. Soul is the energy of energies. Spirit is the soul of souls. God is the spirit of spirits.

68 I resemble not-I — the higher movement and principle of all art and knowledge.

69 I am you.

73 The greatest good endures in the imagination.

89 We will come to understand the world when we understand ourselves, since we and it are integrating in the centre. God’s children, godly embryos are we. One day we are to become what our Father is.

III. Sophie, or On Woman

92 One is alone with whomever, whatever one loves.

108 All enchantment is an artistic madness. All passion is an enchantment. An alluring maiden is an actual sorceress, inasmuch as one believes in her.

113 There is only one temple in the world, and that is the human body. Nothing is holier than this high Form.

   One touches heaven, when one touches a human body.

124 Each wrong deed, each unworthy sentiment, is an infidelity to the Beloved — an adultery.

138 All absolute sensation is religious.
IV. Notes on the Margin of Life

145 To be the more complete human – person – that is the destiny and the ur-impulse in humanity.

147 Each person that overcomes his persona is a person in two powers – or a genius. In this respect, one can truly say that there were no Greeks, but rather those who had been given Greek genius. An educated Greek was only very indirectly, and so a small component of, his adopted work. Hence the greater or purer individuality of the Greek arts and sciences – which one scarcely can deny – is accounted for by the fact that within limits they had seized upon and modernised Egyptian and Oriental mysticism. In Ionia one marks the softening influx of the warmer Asiatic heavens, just as on the other hand one will perceive in the early Doric people the mysterious hardness and strangeness of the Egyptian Godhead. Later writers have often noted these ancient forms of modern and romantic instinct, and observed that native forms may be inspired with new spirit, and placed among modern people in order to contain the thoughtless course of modern civilisation and to turn their attention back to abandoned holy places.

205 When we see a giant, we inquire after the position of the Sun – and pay attention, to see if it isn’t only the shadow of a pygmy.

(On the colossal workings of the small – aren’t they all clearly like the shadows of pygmies?)

V. From the Hidden World

206 All that is visible rests upon the invisible – the audible upon the inaudible – the felt upon the unfelt. Perhaps thinking rests upon unthinking –

208 Light is the vehicle of the communion of the world; is this true community not likewise in the spiritual sphere?

213 Man is a Sun and his senses are Planets.

228 All is seed.
When the spirit perishes, it becomes human. When the human perishes, it becomes spirit. Death frees the spirit, death frees the human.

What corresponds to the human existence thereafter?

The daemonic – or the existence of the Genius – to whom the body is that which the soul is to us.

Every word is a word of incantation. Whatever spirit is called, such a one appears.

Since God was able to become man, he can become even stones, plants, animals and elements, and perhaps there is in this way a perpetual deliverance in nature.

The individuality in nature is wholly infinite.

How much does this prospect of our hopes for a universal personality invigorate us!

Is this not what the ancients called sympathy?

Even our thoughts are effective factors of the universe.

Madness and magic have many similarities. A magician is an artist of madnesses.

Instruction for life in the hereafter. Our life is no dream – but it should and perchance will become one.

from The Encyclopaedia

Everyone should endorse an encyclopaedia. All fundamental knowledge ultimately becomes neglected.

Paradise is strewn over the earth – and therein become unknown – its scattered lineaments are bound to coalesce – its skeleton is bound to become enfleshed. Regeneration of paradise.

Just as Copernicus did, so all good researchers – physicians and observers and thinkers – must do: turn the data and the method about, in order to see whether it wouldn’t fit better that way.

There is no true distinction between theory and praxis.
I. Philosophy

317 To annihilate the principle of contradiction is perhaps the highest problem of the higher logic.

320 Spirit is a purified act.

344 Don't even God and nature play? Theory of the players. Holy play.

349 The higher philosophy deals with the marriage of nature and spirit.

II. Mathematics and Natural Knowledge

352 The number system is the model of a true symbolic language. Our letters should become numbers, our language arithmetic. What did the Pythagoreans truly mean by the powers of numbers?

356 It is very possible that even in nature marvellous mystic numbers occur. Even in history – Isn't everything full of meaning, symmetry, allusion, and strange relationships? Can't God reveal himself in mathematics, just as in every other form of knowledge?

362 Physics is nothing but the teaching of imagination.

III. Medicine, Psychology

390 The essence of sickness is as obscure as the essence of life.

392 One could call every illness an illness of the soul.

398 The physician's art is indeed the art of slaying.

410 The temper of a word points to musical proportions in the soul. The acoustics of the soul are still dark and obscure, but perhaps of a very momentous scope. Harmonic and disharmonic oscillations.
IV. Philology and Art

434  Is language indispensable for thinking?

482  A fairy-tale is truly like a dream-image – apart from its conclusion. An ensemble of wonderful things and occurrences – a musical fantasy – the harmonious effect of an Aeolian harp – nature itself.

V. States and Human Patterns

498  One must treat the whole earth as ONE estate and learn from its economy. The states must finally, truly realise that the attainment of all their aims is possible only through complete, collective principles. Alliance systems. The approximation of a universal monarchy.

VI. Cosmology and Religion

512  On the lovemaking of the soul with the body –

515  The art of becoming all-powerful. The art of realising our intentions totally. We must receive the body as the soul in our dominion. The body is the instrument for the formation and modification of our world. We must also seek to form our body as a wholly capable organ. Modification of our instrument is modification of the world.

531  Magic of the star-like power. Through it man becomes as powerful as the stars; he is related to the stars.

539  We are at once in and out of nature.

The book of art has still not been written. It is but from this point to be invented. Fragments of this kind are but literary seeds. There may be many barren grains amongst them: nonetheless, imagine – if only a single one sprouts!
The Black Opal of Jundah
(for Kathleen Raine)

JAMES COWAN

‘He is seen in Nature in the wonder of a flash of lightning.’ Kena Upanishad

It was with some difficulty that I made the journey along the lonely outback road towards Jundah. The dry earth and clay hills dimpled by gidgee bushes rose like fortressed outposts that guarded my approach to the desert. Although I had expected to experience loneliness on this particular stretch of road, I had also half anticipated meeting up with men who understood the desert’s arid ways. From them I had hoped to learn how best to survive in the event that I might ever become lost. But unfortunately I met with no one who possessed this knowledge. Instead I arrived in Jundah hot and extremely thirsty after my first encounter with this part of a remote and waterless inland.

At the local pub I was informed that all the available rooms were occupied by members of a visiting road gang. The publican recommended that I try Mrs Oates’ boarding house further down the road. The man informed me that normally Mrs Oates no longer took in lodgers because of her extreme age. But he thought that she might make an exception in my case since there was no other place in town for me to stay. I thanked the publican for his advice and made my way along the deserted main street towards a galvanized iron house that I could see on the edge of town.

Mrs Oates’ house was the colour of blood now that the red paint had faded. The few windows in the walls of the building had long since been boarded up. A broken weather-vane on the roof sloped downwards towards the street in a way that suggested that the poor cock had fallen asleep on its perch. Nevertheless its beak and comb pointed east in the direction from where I had come. I wondered then whether I had made the right decision journeying so far from the country that I knew so well simply to experience what other men considered to be an acceptable way of living, surrounded as they were by sand dunes and stones. It was with some trepidation that I eventually walked up to the
unpainted, wood-panelled door to Mrs Oates’ house and knocked.

Presently I heard the sound of slippers shuffling on the uncarpeted floor inside. Then the door opened and I recognized an elderly woman standing in the doorway. A naked bulb behind her head illumined her grey, rather unkempt hair in a manner reminiscent of a halo. I found myself asking whether Mrs Oates had perhaps entered this world not as a child but as a wise old woman. She stood before me wearing an unshapely cotton dress, toe-holed slippers, with a coloured shawl about her shoulders. Her arms were deeply tanned, yet the veins on them stood out in a way that indicated a lifetime of hard physical work. Her lips seemed to quiver slightly as she observed me from beneath tufted eyebrows.

‘Yes?’ she asked.

‘I was hoping that you might have a room,’ I said, explaining that the pub had no vacancies.

‘I am too old for lodgers, you know. But then, where else will you find a bed in this town?’ Mrs Oates asked, partly of herself.

‘I am very grateful,’ I replied, following Mrs Oates into the yellowing darkness of the main living-room.

In spite of the subsiding heat of the late afternoon sun outside, the room in which we stood radiated a coolness like that of a monk’s cell. The unpainted walls were patterned with age and the boarded up windows allowed only a vague suggestion of light to filter through. The floor, dark-stained from use, was bare except for the numerous beds that stood upon it. It became obvious to me that if I had planned on obtaining a private room for myself, then I would have to be content with a public bed instead because of the lack of partitions in the room. Evidently Mrs Oates held little patience for people such as myself who craved privacy at a time when there was no other shelter available elsewhere in town.

‘How long do you plan to stay?’ Mrs Oates inquired.

‘A night; perhaps two,’ I replied.

‘Then I will give you the bed of seven circles,’ the old woman added as she led me deeper into the ill-lit interior of her house.

Now this was the first time that Mrs Oates had intimated that there might be grades of accommodation in her establishment. If I were to receive the bed of seven circles, then it occurred to me that the other beds about the house must rate high or low accordingly. In the poor
light, however, it was difficult to assess any formal notation on the various beds about the room. There were no numbers on the respective pillows; nor indeed were the beds arranged along the walls in any particular way. I was left with the impression that Mrs Oates alone held the key to any numeric order that might have existed, and that this order was known only to herself. It was the sort of information, I realized, that none of the men on the Jundah road would have been able to pass on to me even if I had been fortunate enough to meet one of them.

At first Mrs Oates made no attempt to lead me to my bed. Rather, she seemed pre-occupied with a large bedspread that she was in the process of crocheting. This she took in her hands as she lowered herself into a rocking chair. Picking up a yarn of wool and a crochet needle from the floor, the ageing woman allowed her fingers to resume work upon the quilt under the yellow light, while the sun outside continued to slip below the horizon. I was left with the distinct impression that the interruption my sudden appearance on her doorstep had caused was now over as far as she was concerned. Calm reigned again in this room of carefully contained light and darkness where before only the sound of wool rubbing against a crochet needle might have ever disturbed the silence.

'So you have come to visit the desert?' Mrs Oates inquired in a voice that indicated her basic interest in my wellbeing. At the same time her tone sounded detached, as if she were observing no more than a courtesy on my behalf.

'I have always heard how silent it is out there at night,' I replied.

'Ah, yes. Noise can be an enemy of solitude. You must travel a long way to hear silence.'

'I have heard that in the Negri Mountains near here, there are men who live alone.'

Mrs Oates nodded. 'They are foreigners, both of them. But they have learnt to accustom themselves to their isolation.'

'What do they do out there?' I asked.

'These men dig for opal. I suspect they are looking for the perfect stone. Of course, they will never find it,' the old woman added.

The Negri Mountains lay some distance away, across a dry water-course that separated the town from the desert beyond. No one lived in these mountains except the foreign opal prospectors, who, it was
rumoured, did not take kindly to visitors from the outside world. According to the regulars at the Jundah pub, it was advisable to give these men as wide a berth as possible. That is, if one did not wish to come to any harm. Yet, in contrast, Mrs Oates seemed to think that the opal prospectors were not at all dangerous, nor did they wish ill upon anyone. I was left with the impression that the ‘perfect opal’ that they sought for so keenly, far from being of a threatening nature to an outsider like myself as suggested to me during my conversation with the Jundah pub regulars, was instead of a substance not easily comprehended, not even by those foreigners who spent their days digging for it. Mrs Oates’ view was that these prospectors were looking for something that was impossible to unearth – at least, not with any ordinary pick and shovel.

‘Why do they remain out there?’ I asked.

‘Something afflicts them,’ Mrs Oates answered, the ball of wool rolling slowly along the floor in the direction of the open doorway as her hands crocheted. ‘It is not so much a disease, but an addiction. You see, they have come from elsewhere perhaps burdened with memories of a past that they find difficult to forget. The calamity of dispossession and exile can often leave a man rootless. It is this uncertainty that often forces a man to look for something permanent in his life, even if that object is no more than a black opal. Obviously, these foreigners I speak of have resolved to stay where they are in the Negri Mountains until they have found what they are looking for.’

Even as the dusk light outside shaded the bare earth road in a sombre red glow, I observed that the quilt Mrs Oates was busily crocheting was made up of a series of circles, each in a different colour.

‘You seem to be familiar with what these men are looking for,’ I said to the old woman. ‘Perhaps you have experienced a similar exile yourself.’

‘It is true. All exiles are the same. Only the circumstances change,’ Mrs Oates replied. ‘My own life even now has been made up of a series of encounters, and escapes. When I was a very young girl, my father was killed by a bolt of lightning one stormy night when he was riding back to camp on his horse. He had been a drover, you see. His body was found on the track not so much mutilated, but burnt to a neat cinder of flesh. It was impossible to bury him because to move him would have meant that his incinerated image might have crumbled into dust. So he
was left where he lay, the charred remains of an errant thunderbolt. Even now when I pass that spot on the track I see his body of ashes stencilled into the earth.

'Later, when I was not much more than twelve years old, my mother was killed by a drunken Aborigine who attacked her for no reason at all. She was stabbed to death outside the drover's camp where we had continued to live after my father's death. All I remember at the end is her cry of anguish that she had been struck down, not by the drunken Aborigine but by the voice of my father. It seemed that she confused the glint of the knife in her assailant's hand with his agonized plea to remain alive, untouched by the electrical discharge of light that eventually consumed him. So that within a short span of years I had been left an orphan, the victim of events that appeared to have no logical cause. Fate, it seemed, had chosen to exile me from the bosom of my family.

'When I grew to be a young woman, I in turn married a drover. With him I journeyed about the remote desert interior herding cattle from one waterhole to another. It was a life of wandering that filled me with a feeling of belonging everywhere and nowhere all at the one time. As soon as I fell pregnant, however, my life with him on the track came to a close. More children followed until I had given birth to nine children. One of these died in childbirth. Of the other eight, only four are alive today. One died of bronchitis, another drowned while trying to cross a river in flood on horseback, a little girl was burnt alive in her cot, and one of my remaining sons was killed in a road accident. Some years ago my husband died from a heart attack. My four surviving children have moved away from the district in search of work. So I am left here alone.

'For this reason I understand the nature of exile. Like those foreigners in the Negri Mountains, I have experienced what it is like to be uprooted from what I know and love. All that was given to me has been taken away. My parents, my loved-ones, the life of freedom on the track behind the herd with my husband — these things I have known all too briefly. Now that they have passed from me I am left with a void in my life that some might call loss. But for me it is not so. I recognize in these things that were once given to me and then taken away a pattern of giving, shared joy even. I live here now in Jundah alone, in darkness for much of the time, content to crochet quilts and reflect on the unfortunate events that make up my past life.'
I sat in silence on the edge of one of the beds while Mrs Oates recalled incidents that had happened in her life. Her voice was untroubled by any false sentiment as she spoke. It was as if she had finally accepted the fact that her life, though profoundly affected by circumstances and events beyond her control, nevertheless held some meaning. In each death of those she had loved, in each quivering mound of ashes stencilled into the earth, there was an indefinable pattern borne out of the anguish that she had experienced confronting what, in the end, was for her an inevitable feeling of exile and dispossession. For what she had created had been torn from her. Even the moments of exhilaration that she had felt riding behind the herd with her husband beyond the desert waterholes had been destroyed by the act of giving birth. In the end all that was left for her was a sense of uprootedness that required much more than a black opal to secure, or even bury.

'So you see, the desert has ways of stripping a person bare,' Mrs Oates said. 'Although I have never seen the ocean, I sometimes think that I have drowned many times over.'

'Do you think this is how the opal prospectors in the Negri Mountains might feel?'

'Who knows? They live alone out there among the gidgee bushes and stones. In such a place campfires have a way of creating uncertainty at night. It is for them to know whether their search has been worthwhile. For myself, knowing that I have witnessed my father's spirit as ashes has been important to me. At least I know that he was taken up by a thunderbolt. Is that not something to hope for?'

'But I have only come out here to observe the desert, Mrs Oates. Already you are suggesting to me that this is not enough: that I should be going deeper into the Negri Mountains just like those foreigners have done, in pursuit of—well, I don't quite know what. Since this black opal is unlikely to exist, why should I put myself at such risk?'

At this point Mrs Oates raised the quilt over her knees so that the pattern on it was revealed more clearly to me. I found myself looking at seven multi-coloured circles, all of them neatly concentric in a design, contained one within another. It was then that I realized how Mrs Oates was busily crocheting the quilt for the bed that she had reserved originally for me. Only at this point did I sense that what she was doing had something to do with the trauma of her own life. For she, like those
foreigners in the Negri Mountains, could not escape the memories of her past. Its spectre lay before her like the ashes of her father on the ground. I alone would be warmed by the image of her father as a memory, still stencilled in her mind with all the incandescence of the thunderbolt which had transfigured him on the track that stormy night so long ago.

'Is it possible that I might avoid the loss of what those men have not yet found?' I asked.

'It depends,' Mrs Oates replied in a tone that reflected her serious consideration of my question. 'These men have left behind what others would be satisfied to recover. Now the black opal possesses them and it is not for me to say whether their choice is correct or not. Only they know whether what they have left behind compares with what they have not yet discovered. For you, that choice might involve searching for something that is not there, or at least not immediately evident.'

Mrs Oates' enigmatic way of expressing herself had begun to confuse me. I was not sure whether she was inferring that the opal prospectors had lost something important and had gained nothing in return. Or whether they had discarded something else in favour of unearthing what was impossible to find. It occurred to me, however, that these men had made a choice and were content to live in solitude in order that they might find what it was they were looking for or had lost, long ago. Of course, to expect a black opal to tumble from the roof of a cavern was like expecting one's father to be struck down by lightning. Such things did not occur often, if at all. And when they did it was obvious that such events as these were extremely significant. Mrs Oates' life of unwitholding in the face of dispossession and exile was testimony to that.

For had she not experienced much more than was due to any one person in any one life? Had she not learnt the true nature of exile and the direction in which to attempt her return? The poor cock on the roof had turned its back on the solitude that had inspired those foreigners to seek refuge in the Negri Mountains looking for black opal, pointing instead towards the east from where I had come in order to encounter the desert for the first time. It struck me then that I had left behind what Mrs Oates and the opal prospectors were desperately hoping to uncover! It was hard to imagine that the black opal so mysteriously contained in the earth might be linked to the thunderbolt
that had struck down Mrs Oates’ father. Nor that his ashes might in any way not be stencilled in the ground as a mark of his transfiguration now that he had finally departed.

So that although my confusion was real, my reasons for being so were less evident. I had stumbled into an outpost on the edge of the desert, hoping to experience the noise of silence. In the process, I had met with no one on the road who might teach me to understand the arid ways of the desert. Instead I had encountered an old woman whose youth had departed, who lived alone in a boarded up house that was the colour of blood. This house was filled with memories of dispossession and exile, a collection of beds long since unslept in by lodgers, and one orange light that glowed like a halo in the darkness. On Mrs Oates’ knees a large quilt depicted seven concentric multi-coloured circles that, on completion, was to warm me while I slept. How rich was my universe! Anticipating silence, I had gathered about me the husks of another’s harvest. For Mrs Oates’ world was that of black opals, thunderbolts and ashes. It was also a world that to penetrate required going beyond the arid reaches of the desert.

The foreigners in the Negri Mountains knew this, of course. That is why they had made their home in solitude, troubled by little except the prospect of unearthing a black opal. Now that I had heard of these men and gained some insight into their need for solitude, I too wanted to unearth a black opal. It was only natural to want to do so, since its discovery intimated much more than ashes. Nor had Mrs Oates, in spite of the enigma of her person, failed to discourage me from making such a choice. She knew that thunderbolts do not strike the cautious. All she could do was crochet a quilt for me and hope that I would not feel too much alone in the event of my own solitude becoming oppressive. After all, those seven circles on the quilt were the colours of the rainbow. With them warming me as I slept I knew I would be bound by their substance unprismed as light – the same light whose absence makes opal black. This light found its origin in the region to where the weather-vane pointed, I realized. I had come from there too, once, along the Jundah road. Now I yearned to go back.

‘It is time for you to rest,’ Mrs Oates said, rising from her chair at last and tossing the quilt she had completed on one of the beds. ‘You have a long journey ahead of you into the desert tomorrow. And then, perhaps, back to where you have come from.’
Biren De: A Flash of Comprehension

KESHAV MALIK

Centre yourself on the speck of a sun-struck dust particle or, if you like, on the fine point of an illumined pin, and you get some feel of a Biren De oil-on-canvas. But there may be other, and perhaps more apt analogies to his work: the spokes of a revolving wheel—the whole thing going round and round with such speed that the hub appears still, no movement at all. No agitated movement, that is, but one that steadies the flicker of the seeing eye. The blinding light at the centre of the artist’s most eloquent works seems to re-enact the incandescence of the galactic fire.

But why the obsessive recurrence of the wheel or ring of fire in his compositions?—for these represent the reunion of the soul with its own. Here the split halves, or the polar opposites of a run down world once again find the perfection of wholeness. The light ‘petals’ in De’s unique Mandalas achieve a harmonious and yet dynamic pattern, an order kin to the full blooming lotus. Certainly, the Chakra of Being seems ever to whirl majestically in this artist’s deepest thoughts.

And yet it is towards a similar imaginative expansion that the late 20th century vision strives. Quite like the unbroken unity of the self-contained elliptical shape lured the vision of the earliest clairvoyants, so now it calls out to the reflective moderns. In Biren De the mathematical harmony, of ostensibly esoteric symbols, receives telling expression in what may legitimately be termed the art of the inward eye, and so in the idiom of our own day and time. He does not chant his Mantra mechanically but infuses it with fresh associations; fresh, but still with their ultimate source in the perennial, if invisible reality. Only, he has had to hew his way out of the thicket of ordinariness step by laborious step. And so, today, in his maturest works, the extraneous, initiative gesture is nowhere in sight. He now paints only to induce a flash of inner comprehension. With the dropping away of the banal figuration from his work of the fifties, the focus on the circumference with a luminous centre became his main preoccupation. Every screw
(so to speak) of the vital colour band had now been tightened in the scheme, till the body of a given composition began, as if, to spin upon its axis.

The Shakti symbols — the conventional ones — were gradually replaced by the single dazzling jewel of the legendary lotus (‘June 70’ – 1970). Here, then, is the wisdom of the imagination — a penetrating third eye, like the Shiva’s, raying out into the heart of the recipient.

In his work of the seventies, and onwards to those that followed (‘Painting 81’ – two of them similarly titled, and ‘Painting 82’), no respite is allowed the viewer to slip away into some brown study, some minor delight. What De’s genre does is to order self, to make it jump to attention. It is the self’s integration which the painter desires, and he goes for it single-mindedly. And, without doubt, he makes us fuse into our selves — our eyes, our ears, and all our other senses brought to a moment of intensity. Here, then, is an attunement to the mystery and that awesome power that moves the tides in the ocean, as much as the bloodstream in the human veins. Such has been the painter’s prayer, and life-long practice:

The mind’s observatory spies
Through its dozens of apertures
On a giant circumference:
Stand anywhere, to observe,
And there’s truth
At each point on hand.
Shift focus from chink to chink,
Swivel round and round
And you arrive at a Grand Total
That is worth more
Than its weight in gold.

On one level Biren De’s compositions are simple, being almost like decorative patterns — patterns often come across in psychedelic design, the ones that take off after the turning disc. But this is a superficial reading of his work. For quite as when viewing an astronomer’s photographic plate (with its impression of the shell-shaped, light-waxing galaxy) we are brought to book — to more than ordinary alarm, awe and uplift — so too with his work, which is really a graphic visualization of the primal force pulsing in the germinating seed, as in the pointed star.
No concessions are made in this, the self centering. It has to be a sheer vertical rise, or it's nothing. The wonder of De's spinning circles sets up its own resonance in our mind; resonance, which touches off a chain of vital reactions in turn, made up as if of the deepest memory and meaning. This is how, with De, we obtain intimations into the heart of the continuum — the terrible but still recreative fire that fills space, that lights up human awareness. Tertiary images none in this art, neither are there any associations such as bubble up in subconscious reverie. Here, only the urgent tidings of being and becoming, nothing less.

This, then, is art, but one which wills to be like that divine furnace where the spirit is to be reburnished. The art may also be compared to an insucking, but cleansing whirlpool. Else, the parallel would be with Mesmer's, before-the-eyes-swinging lustrous metal — the one that sends one on an inward trip. But with Biren De, if trance, then it is a deeply meaning-pregnant one. Here one's entire being is to be given over to truth, the unconditional surrender to the compelling light.

To repeat, De's art abets at the integration of personality, and that without the use of words anywhere. In his many exhibition catalogues most of his work is untitled. But if the art takes no recourse to words, there still is a sound from it as of a prayer wheel — a deep vowel sound; and this one seems aimed at not the sick or the unwell but the normal and the healthy — the strong in need of uplift from the law of averages. This particular need is the need of sublimating one's vital powers, the heightening of awareness, the opening of the doors of perception on the fundamental stuff of reality beyond its passing forms.

De's work does not represent an 'escape', even though it expresses no social concerns whatever. This, for his true concern is not with the outward I, but with the ineradicable question of being, and not being; the pressing need of renewal in a world increasingly made up of noise. It therefore denotes an act of spiritual detachment — the attitude of any upwards pining spirit.

To soak in the spectrum of one of De's works is to expose oneself to an osmosis, such as would presumably take place when initiated by a true seer. But here there is a concrete visionary directness, as much as a commanding silence. The art has no sensuous appeal to speak of, nor even the religious one based on any stereotyped ritual. Not nature alone, but nature plus an actively engaged self — the interaction of the two — goes to raise the genre to its elevated level. The genre may well be
defined as an idea-ideal symbiosis. And though it is not contentless, the content has become much too unfamiliar in an age raised on empiricism, in the main.

That a continuity can be traced in De's inspired madness will be observed as one goes over his earliest drawings. An intensity is already in evidence in the fifties, but years on years are needed to really incarnate a vision such as this one in full splendour. The artist's brush-work shows how painstaking he has been (having shunned the short cut that the acrylics could have been for his order of composition). Thus, also, no slick touches, nor hard edges either. Knowing no hurry, and with no ambition to get rich quick – affectwise – there is nothing facile in the body of De's output. With him the colour spectrum must fan out full, like the feathers of a peacock in glory. Only this could carry true conviction. So, the passage through the senses, to the seat of intelligence.

De – though he is reluctant to jot down his ideas, is still as articulate in expressing his convictions as in actual performance. He is crystal clear about sticking to the strait and narrow, come what may. He knows that what kills art is compromise, and the weapon that stays temptation away is the discipline of self-communion. If therefore he has not done as well as he might in the marketplace, he is certainly the possessor of an enviable inner reserve such as betokens unshakable faith. Truly, his work is a response to the mysterious universe:

The warp and woof of the world
pure vibration,
what pulses at the barred centre?

As if, there, a gigantic cyclotron
quickened the particles,
and they relayed the ever-widening sonic waves –
the boom spread-eagling the hapless intruder
upon a sheer backdrop
of enormous space and savage sparks.

O, thus to be hurled beyond
a mapped universe,
and into wheeling circles!
In the inexorable swirl caught,
eyes involuntarily closing –
the head bowing.
Promise 1965
oil on canvas 83 x 110 cm
Private collection, USA
June '67  1967
oil on canvas  121.8 × 172.7 cm
June '70 1970
oil on canvas  $183 \times 121.8$ cm
Collection National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
June '67  1967
oil on canvas  121.8 x 172.7 cm

# National Academy of Art, New Delhi
June '70  1970

Oil on canvas  183 × 121.8 cm

Collection National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
October '72  1972
oil on canvas  132 x 132 cm
Collection Hotel Maurya-Sheraton, New Delhi
April '73(c)  1973
oil on canvas  132 x 102 cm
Collection Chester and Davida Herwitz Family, Worcester, Mass., USA
August '81  1981
oil on canvas  138.2 × 102.4 cm
Collection Chester and Davida Herwitz Family, Worcester, Mass., USA
October '82  1982
oil on canvas  117.7 × 81.9 cm
Collection Chester and Davida Herwitz Family, Worcester, Mass., USA
May '83  1983
oil on canvas  121.9 x 86.3 cm
Collection Chester and Davida Herwitz Family, Worcester, Mass., USA
KESHAV MALIK

Long-distance Traveller

Light, long-distance traveller
traversing the endless corridor of the hiatus –
only all too eager, to meet
the spinning specks of universal dust.

Light from the back of a rumoured beyond,
finding a footing, now on this
now that, lucky hand –
and so soon gone.

Light, that charmed the first Adam
and all Adam’s sons,
still charms me and shall charm
all the little ones
yet to come.

Light, light! – racing unbidden
from a million shooting stars,
through the untold untrodden tracks
of a forbidden realm,
carries no message
but self-illumination.

Polar Winter

Much, too much of the dark
and all our thoughts
of the bugbears of a long night.

Much, too much . . .
and no possibility of light,
no white-washed sea-gull in sight.

Dark, continent wide dark
and deep in its directionless arc
the blind leading the blind
Dark . . . dark . . . the longest – a night
of knives of ice. Who here will lure
to rebirth any redeeming light.
Rocks slewed by the sea, in the undertow
I watched them repositioned, shape-lifted,
an evolutionary tableau
proportioned by the aeons, durables
whittled by fractions — mullet in that flow,
old as the blue Mediterranean,
blunt-nosed, elusive, once served in gold-leaf
to an Emperor, prostrate in purple silks.

An alternative world composed like ours,
is sub-surface; universal bedrock,
meteoric continents of the deep,
abyssal depths, we only see the flowers
of surf ringing the buried land-masses,
or watch migrant butterflies disappear,
drawn to an island that’s no longer there,
lemmings running to meet a territory
that’s swallowed by the gullet of the sea.

And of Atlantis and its drowned sea-kings,
the marble and bronze statues of its gods
rolled into fissures with gold plate, gold spoil,
sea-helmets snagged in the serpentine coil
of vermilion weeds, was it glimpsed one day
by a youth netting prawns in a gulley
who lifted out a turquoise-stoned trophy,
and from that imagined a continent
passed over by fishermen, and the gull’s
plangent outcry in pursuit of that hull?

Particles glitter in their uplifting,
in storm or quiet the one motion’s change,
a stone uroboros round a sand ring,
yellow as a sunflower’s eye,
a black grain of Atlantis travelled there.
I stir the dazzle, compounded worlds lift
in a sparkle of nebulae.
The lost sea-kingdoms are in every wave,
the surf's sculpting throws up fossil and shell,
cuttlefish bones, the Atlantean drift;
the sea's a prismatic turquoise ring-stone
set above a black universal grave
in which stars exit and drowned bodies drift.

Prayer

Lord of the stillness in the stone,
the sun-ray imprisoned in that dark,
sustainer of our impossible agony
at things tree-twisted, wrongly done,
and visible like names cut in gnarled bark,
upholder in our black uncertainty,
our fear we are too much alone
in moving like a fly around the walls,
and hoping by speaking out to withstand
the storm of madness threatening
to sever the web's last bright strand,
illuminate the troubled mind,
the saw-teeth of the nerves, and lighten all
who bunch themselves into a spider's ball
and flinch from light, the one poisoned by guilt,
and one who's lost the reason for his dread,
and so it deepens; words don't fit
its unendurable substrata,
and there's only speechlessness
when the mouth opens, and the dread
the silence is inhabited
by someone else inside one's head,
lighten those worst hours when we can't accede
to go on, and without respite
hurt ourselves deeper than the injury
inflicted on others, despite
compassion granted; help extract
the sting that paralyses, and permit
a clearer eye to see in depth
that suffocates, somewhere the pure
and unabstracted energy of light.
II

Help me on afternoons more terrible
than nights, to endure poverty,
the damp walls of a broken house, fused wires,
the flash-light of anxiety
sounding its voltage like a fence
circling a meadow's circumference,
when nothing but these small blue pills
can deaden the intolerable
emptiness attendant on sitting still
waiting for nothing to arrive,
but words that bring no consolation, no
remedial amelioration,
only the poem's affirmative will
to outlive human suffering.

Lord of the skylark's windy home,
the high blue spaces, hear this prayer
for the homeless, the mad, the lost,
those who shake when the bottle's dead,
or walk the streets in loneliness
searching for love that never comes,
and still enquire without redress
of their unsanctioned deficit,
their unappeasable, involuntary
inheritance of lucklessness, despair
at ever finding a way out
of the maze. Enlighten by a word,
a sign, a token gentleness,
this state of numb confusion, relentless
disparagement, and point the way
to beginning over again
the slow ascent to light, the gradations
of blue that come at break of day.
The Past

One has to live with it contemporaneously, not as an undeveloped photograph, the film never retrieved from the camera, the images held captive, shadow-blurrs thumbling the light in which the accent fell on what seemed crystallized, particular, but as a seamless continuity, the flashes meeting in a single star, a unity connecting how we were with what we are, no dissociation, the past no longer viewed as a broken mirror, the pieces looked for in a clouded well, the fragments irretrievable. Rather, consider life as a composition, the line in all its inconsistencies, strengthened by failure, things not properly done, and always advancing with bolder strokes, self-corrective, resourceful, directed at the spherical, rounded completion with which a pebble’s polished by the sea, all of its storm-worn angularity brought to a smoothness pleasing to the hand, balanced, harmonious, resting on sand.

Consciousness

Is taking form as the variant seed, mineral, earth-locked, germinative in the dark, it wants to isolate selectively, and where the idea is already a need, the nutritive intersection occurs, the particular grown to awareness in the yellow wagtail’s black swivel eye, the migrant swallow’s shadow eating space, its only knowledge that to fly means a masked insect dance screened by the sun,
and is a process of separation,
the flower compact in the tiny spore,
evolved out of root-darkness, shoot and stem
informed of the foxglove's pink speckled bell,
its honeyed fertilization the bee
learns by aroma and transmits
with no connecting link. Man has them all,
the elements, but can't reverse the chain
to a preconscious state, back of the mind
the shaping force, the primal caul
carried in the wind's belly across space,
the furnace-glare of planets, raging suns,
and in that journey conceived as a dream
of elemental unity — blue egg
exploded in a cave pool, fish-helpless,
and left to swim until the mirrored face
realised an identity apart
from water, the asperity of bark,
fire-streaked stars pulsing on the black surface,
but lost the origin in going free.
It's there as an undercurrent, a charge
we don't connect with — I go open eyed,
animated by trance, the turbulent
blow-back of the poem's entry
into an ordered channel, and arrest
upheaval of the hills, the lightning flash,
tame the unsettled universe, rename
its constituents, lid the boiling fire,
as once the individual appraised
a first time things estranged, smashed with his fist
a challenging reflection and went blank
until the image reformed, and a fish
flashed its red thorny back under his wrist.
The Light

The light falling across this afternoon
.touches down in the pink eye of a phlox,
defines a radius, it's come this far,
a planetary migration from a star
to elucidate what it finds – I see
a measured pool of its discovery,
things highlighted by so searching a beam,
responsive to that energy, a blue,
a pink hydrangea shading, a scarlet
distinction in the sweetpea, everything
discovered so late by the source, there's no
synchronicity in the arrival
of what is spatial, the blue-eyed speedwell.

I spread my fingers to its easy glow,
the warmth imparted by that white-gold flood,
and cup it like a weightless nectarine
in hands pulled down by gravity,
before the earth tilts into blue shadow.
And then the star-fires; if I could locate
that bright one's transmission, and name the place
of its outgoing, I would catch a ray
and know its origin on the blue map
of the heavens and recommunicate
its diamond fall by pointing to the gap
with a fingertip sensitized by space.
I can only go from where I am. We can only move from where we be: that is if there is movement, going. Gatagataqamyamanam. Change implies the changeless. We live by myths. Myth is just the poetisation of movement, of becoming. Thus sacrifice, yagya, the symbolic burning by Agni, the fire-god, of the concocted movement, and so of the object. Sanctification is dissolution. Time burnt is poetry made. When time and place are burnt to ash – that is the concrete object is – only light shines over. There is now no one and no where to go.

But I am here. Every movement I make is samskara, ritual, every statement I make the sanctifying word, mantra. In this ambit of sacrifice, with the pragmatic statement of who I am, and where I am placed, I speak. Let me start, as my Vedic ancestors did, from where I am. In every statement of sacrifice my ancestors spoke of the mythic Mount Meru (whether it is beyond the Pamirs, as some have explained, or beyond the beyond, who cares? – South of the Mount Meru, one said at the sacrificial hearth, and in the Jambu Dvipa (the isle of the Jujube fruit) down the Himalaya, and south of the Godavary, I sit, I used to say, on the bank of the Cauvery – here I sit, I so and so, Ramakrishna Sharma, etc., etc. Also I would add, I am, say, in Kaliyuga, add in the twenty seventh year of the sixty year cycle, on the twenty eighth day of the lunar month, and on this star-conjunction of Rohini or Aswini – I sit for sacrifice. Look, look, how the fire burns, it burns royally. This same fire, remember, kept safely and well-fed in its earthen-pot, and in its pure proper corner, will also burn me – burn me when I am dead. Someone, my son, will keep the cremation fire burning till all my body is consumed, and he will then throw the fire-wood poker into the subsiding flame. Then when all is burnt, he goes home, the son, whosoever he is, and wheresoever I am. And his, the son’s turn too will come, (for, as you see, everything turns in a mandala, a circle), and when his head bursts too, sometime later – where has he gone, I ask of you? He, if he could speak, could say, where? nowhere. Is can never
become. The myth of I (sitting to the south of the Meru, etc.) - I, of the ancestry of Angirasa (the great Vedic sage, etc.), I never was, I never will be. The myth was exploded by fire (my head did, of course) - and nothing ever happened. And that's delight, pure poetry.

But, today, translating that tradition, we might say, something like this. I, this genetic complex, born of many million years of copulations, and living on a speck of dust, called bhu, the earth, rotating in a mandala form, around a planet called the Sun - the Sun Principle, Savitr, hymned in the celebrated Gayatri verse - Gayatri called the mother of the Vedas, and chanted to this day as the very essence of Indian thinking -

\[
\text{Tat Savitr varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi...} \\
\text{(That magic splendour of the Solar-truth} \\
\text{he of Light, we contemplate} \\
\text{and may he quicken our intellect.)}
\]

and living then in this ever-circling universe, with other planets ever in bigger and wider mandalas, up to what today one calls, the Black Hole (a name, which like any myth, means more than it says) and maybe there are other universes beyond, so we have been recently told, - universes whose vibrations reach us this millionth of a second, but then that vibration was sent before this earth ever came to be this earth by a strange cosmological accident arising, rotating, and since at that moment my Vedic ancestor did not exist, I should ask myself, who am I then? Who indeed? That's the stuff of poetry. Aham is kavya. I am is poetry. Aham is gnyana. I am is wisdom. Aham is paramamantra, I the magic incantation. The poet is the sage, I am, like my legendary ancestor Anigirasa was, a kavi.

In the beginning there was only the self. Looking around he saw nothing else than the self. He first said 'I am'. Therefore arose the name I.

B.U. 1.4.1.

So there is only one poet.: The 'I' of the I. The atman beyond jiva. He is no one. He is. Is is. And so it. Call It, Brahman, if you like.

'The Brahman,' says the Vākayapadiya, 'the Brahman who is without beginning or end, whose very essence is the Word (sabda), who is the cause of the manifested phonemes, who appears as the objects, from whom the creation of the world (seems to) proceed. Brahman is called Phoneme (akshara) because It is the cause of the phoneme.' Thus begins
Vakayapadiya, the celebrated text on: The Phrase and the Word. And Bhartrhari, its great author, continues,

This is the first step in the ladder leading to salvation: this is the first royal road for all those who desire liberation.

Siva, another name for It Brahman, is the still masculine power. And She Parvathi the play. The unmoving desires to play with itself, and so the abstract became concrete, and mountains rose, and the swift, lisping, gurgling rivers, so that the crops could flourish, and the humans, the cows and the elephants bathe in the flowing waters. And seeing their own faces, ask themselves the question: Who is it that sees? Is he who sees seen by that which sees back? – Or is it just play? The question needs the answer. Would Shiva in his Himalayan retreat, by the lake, Manassarover, have the answer? The water mirrors both the faces. Is, āp, water then the meaning? Is water flow? And when it does not flow, say in the Manassarover, Lake of the Mind, is the lake not water? Water is just water, pure water. ‘Salila eko drastā dvaito bhavathi.’ Is meaning then the face without face? So, the snout that asks the question to the snout below seen in the water, realizes, in meaning there is no snout, and meaning just light, gōh. So the cow becomes, light. And Ganesha, the Lord of Wisdom has an elephant’s head, snout and all. The question asking the question back is poetry. Kratyantu kratyavaha. (R.V. 10.64.2) ‘The poetic thought sees itself seeing.’

Since we have the mountains and the waters, the trees and the moon, man and woman, why not play? So we give names to objects. Nāmadheya, like we give names to chess pieces: the horse, the elephant, the fortress, the Prime Minister or Raja, the King. Now the names are made of phonemes, graphics of breath. So, to name precisely, we must modulate our breath. That is Yoga. Suppose then, the yogi modulates his breath with such strictness, precision, as the word would say itself totally – such a vibration then be its true, whole name.

Imagine then, sitting by some Mount Meru, in the Manassarover of my mind, I vibrate the sound of the object, what would happen, what should happen? Since the object is vibration, and I vibrate the vibration of the object, would not the object appear and say: Look, here I am. So,
pure naming is pure creation. Therefore it is said: first there was the word—Vāc created the World. Poetry now becomes the paradigm of the creator creating universes. You see, we are once again playing. The game, any game is a paradox, and paradox puzzle, and puzzle poetry.

When Brihaspati, (of the family of Angiras) the first of Speech, and the foremost
The sages uttered giving the unnamed a name. (R.V. 10.71).

Then it goes on:

There is a man who sees but has not seen Vāc. There is a man who hears but who has not heard her. But to another she reveals her lovely form, like a young wife, finely robed to her husband.

* * *

There is in the same Rig Veda, a magnificent, famed fable. It is called Purusha Suktha, the hymn of Primal-man.

The Primal man, Purusha, he is there before anything ever was. The gods were created after Him. The gods wishing to sacrifice, that is made sacred, wished to make the very best offering they could for Sacrifice. And what could that be but the Primal man, Purusha himself. So, they tied him with sacrificial grass, while spring became the ritual butter, and summer the sacrificial wood, our beloved sharad r̲t̲u, the autumn, became the oblation. And from this first sacrifice came all objects: cows and horses, hymns and melodies, chandas, poetic meters, the sacrificial word.

From that sacrifice, fully offered,
The Ric and Saman (Vedas) were born,
And metrics was of that
And from that again was the Yajus born. (R.V. 10.90.9)

Thus poetics arose out of the sacrificing of sacrifice at sacrifice.

The word then ended in pure meaning, in ritual ash, vibhūthi. The meaning is Shiva dancing in the crematorium. And there is utsāha, there delight.

* * *

Dusk falls on the Indian earth. South of the Meru, down below the Himalayas, and further still down the Vindhya, etc., etc., lies the famous capital, called the City of Victory, Vijayanagara, founded by the great
sage Vidyaranya, and destroyed by the so-called monotheist Turkoman conquerors. They took five whole months to destroy every temple, tear down the faces of our gods, break the heads of stone elephants at the palace entrances, while our women unwilling to be defiled, burnt themselves alive, and their ashes have mingled with the earth, from which today grasses arise. The cows graze between the ruins of this historic city—a city where Venetians came to buy our diamonds and the Conquistadors to sell arms and military training, to this one and then the other, helping to fight, Raja and nawab against nawab and Raja. Today even the flower-seller street, once half a league long, is now lived in by the panther and the porcupine. The sages, so the tradition says, have retired into the immense round hill behind the river, once in a while at night, so people say, a cowherd will see lights on the top of the hill moving and circling, and disappearing.

The cows drink, after grazing, the waters of this Southern river, which Sri Rama himself had crossed with Sita, and Sayana, the brother of the founder of Vijayanagara, so it is said, later, of course much later, had composed his famous commentaries on the Vedas hereabouts. And once a year, for a month, as everybody around knows, the Ganga visits the river, so that, we poor men and kine, can bathe therein, washing away our transgressions. And as the cows walk back home, delighting in the thought of returning to their calves, move, the dust settles on itself, with the dusk suddenly falling. The cows have many sacred names—Ganga, Gowrie and Tungabhadra. They walk one step, two steps and three steps, amidst these ruins, and four, just as they had done at dawn. In general the Primordial word (pada) is that of the cow. The cow carries thrice seven names.

Vākena Vākam dvipada, chatushpada akshreṇa mimate sapta vānīhi.

With the power of the Vāk, Vāk was measured out, with the two-footed and the four-footed, and with Akshara they measured out the seven metres.

The two-footed is the common speech, and the four-footed is the chatushpada Atma. The seven feet are of course the seven metres Gayatri, Ushnik, Anusthup, Brihati, Viraj, Trishtup and Jagathi. According to Sayana, Akshara is at once the word and the cow. It is the cow, in fact, who carries all names. Her hidden feet hide the names. Her secret name is the great secret knowledge which ‘the poet searches in revelation.’ It is
because of this variable that the pada, ‘footstep, traces of the footstep,’ has taken on the commonplace word, pada. ‘En général,” continues Renou, in his great introduction4, ‘en générale le (parole) pada, primordiale, est celui de la Vache. La Vache porte trois fois sept noms — trihsapta nāmāghnya bibharti.’ He who knows the padas should teach them like a vidwan, knower of the word, and of footsteps. ‘Soma and Agni are padavih kāvinam – it’s they who have instituted the poetics, Kāya.’ The open itself is a milking cow, which without the cowherd goes her own way — carantīm . . . agopām. When the spoken word was given to man, she allowed herself to be milked in four parts. It is the divaspayah, milk of the heavens. (R.V. 10.114.)

‘When the first dawn shone, the great (thing) the word akśra took birth, on the spot of the cow’s feet.’

Like the four padas, the four feet of the cow, are the four states of Vac, the word. These four states are: Vaikhāri, the spoken word, the non-supreme energy, the aparā, the pronounced – then the madhyama, between the speech and the mental formulation, and behind it again, is the pashyanthi, the seen but not formulated, the upsurge, and finally the Para Vāk, the Ultimate word, the silence beyond silence, the origin and the end of the phoneme. Therefore is poetics (or grammatology) a way to salvation (moksha). The poet (or the grammarian) the sage.

Taking his stand on the essence of the Word, lying beyond the activity of breath (prāna), resting in oneself with all sequence eliminated. After having purified speech, and after having rested it on the mind, after having broken its bonds and made it bondfree – after having reached the inner light, he with knots cut, becomes united with the Supreme Light (kyapadiyam: 1.131).

And this is sabdapurva yoga. Meanwhile let us go back to the four feet of the Cow.

When the Supreme Word, says Abhinavagupta, when it divides itself, one says its body becomes triple, and it is then called pashyanthi, madhyama and vaikhāri, which is crude.

The Ultimate Word, can it ever become human? one may ask. The answer is simple. Just as Shiva created Parvathi to play with, in dance or chess, so did the ultimate silence or Para Vāk want to play with itself, and created its three states. And again just as nothing happened to Shiva
when Parvathi and he played, the Para Vāk is inherent in every word, however gross it might seem. And poetry then is exercise, the sadhana, by which you get back, seek back if slowly from the expression to the expressed, from existence to essence, from vaikhāri to the para.

‘All things’ continues Abhinavagupta, ‘the stones, the trees, the birds, the men, the gods, the demons are all nothing else but the venerable Supreme Word in the form of Shiva.’

We Indians, as you know, we love numbers. Or is it that numbers love us. (May I remind you, your numerals came from us.) We love to talk of the three gunas, the four estates of man, the nine rasas, and so on. In fact in discussion between pundits, even today, according to the context, you say three or four or nine, often only showing your fingers, meaning the gunas, the estates, the asramas or the nine rasas. How impressive and how ridiculous scholars can be. I am of course talking of Indian pundits. Once recently when I asked a Pundit in Madras what tamas meant in the Vedas — it meant darkness or just dusk, as some have interpreted it — my Pundit, rings on his fingers, shawl on his shoulders, chewing his betel, going to spit off the veranda every ten minutes, showed me seven fingers meaning there are seven interpretations. He never once said what his own opinion was. Maybe Pundits are not allowed to have opinions. But not being a Pundit, I can say, maybe dusk is a better word, or twilight, than darkness for tamas in the Vedas. It fits better with the meaning, whether Sayana has explained it thus or not.

But to come back to my subject. Man has not only four estates, but has four avasthas, conditions, states. They are, from the Vedic times: the waking state, the dream state, and the deep sleep state, and the final or Turiya, where even the trace of the ego may not exist, where it is dormant in the third state. The famous Mandukya Upanishad begins: Aum iti etad aksharam idam sarvam. Aum, this syllable indeed is all this. All this is verily brahma. This self is Brahman. This same self has four quarters. And it goes on to say, the first symbolised by A is the person in the waking state, who cognizes external objects, who has seven limbs and nineteen mouths, and who enjoys gross material objects. (You see we never forget numbers.) The second one symbolised by U is the person in the dream state, he who cognizes internal objects, who also has seven limbs, nineteen mouths, etc., etc. But then we come to the
deep sleep state, the third position, indicative of the M sound. In this state we just have prajnanaghana, a mass of consciousness. However we still have here, a discrete, resting ego. Finally, when we come to Turiya, the fourth state – with the long unending bindu, the ultimate M sounding vibration, there where Shiva and Parvathi unite, becoming a 'creative resonance.' There is neither an internal nor an external object, but is just pure consciousness – it is adrishtatma, unseen, unconnected with the world. It is just shantama Shivam, advaitam – peace, auspiciousness, non-duality. Sa atma, sa vijnaniva. He is the self. He is to be known. It then is the source, Light and source, of Abhinavagupta's pratyavimarsha, becoming conscious of one's beingness.

'Le jour commence,' says Valéry, in his famous journal, 'le jour commence par une lumiére plus obscure que toute nuit . . . Un homme (he continues) qui s'eveille est me semble-t-il, . . . a l'état de pureté du moi.' Then at another place, he says: 'Je suis à l'analogue de ce qui est. Je suis encore, O délice, que quelque chose égale à l'ensemble de feu, de soie, d'ardoise, de vapeur et de musique brute simultanée. Je suis un effet de la lumière.' And again: 'Comme je sens a cette heure (Aube): la profondeur de l'apparence (je ne sais l'exprimer) et ceci qui est poésie.' And for ever Valéry asks himself: 'Qui suis-je? Qui suis-je?' Who am I? O my presence with a face, seeing without seeing anything or any one. 'La conscience semble un miroir d'eau.' Consciousness seems a mirror of water. Thus the moi pur. 'The object of the conscious man is the consciousness itself.' (L'objet de l'homme conscient est la conscience même.) And his faithful critic, George Poulet, explains: Moi qui pense et qui me pense, je m'avère le même qui le moi qui est pensé . . . Sujet et objet ne font qu'un, un seule moi pensant et se pensant.' I who think and that which thinks me, I realize, is the same as the I who is thought of. . . . The subject and object are one, the I thinking and thinking (on) itself: Thus the pure 'I' of Valéry. 'What could be more "poetic" than to start working than this irreducible power, which is the same for each one of us, which coincides exactly with ourselves, which moves us, which speaks to us and speaks to itself in us.' So once again the 'I' (the Aham of Sanscrit poetics), the 'I' is – poetry.

'If I have,' says Valéry in his famous essay called 'Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci', 'if I have brought the reader to this solitude, and to this desperate clarity, it is because it was necessary to carry the idea that I have formed of intellectual power to its ultimate
consequence. The human characteristic is consciousness . . . the pure ego, the unique and continuous element in each being of the world which has no name, no history, this deep note of existence itself, dominates the whole complication of existence from the moment it’s heard.’ This pure ego then becomes, as it were, ‘no less real than the centre of gravity of a planetary system.’ ‘In this condition,’ continues Valery, he, the being, ‘immolates in one instant, his individuality. He feels himself pure consciousness, and two of that cannot exist. He is the I, the pronoun of universality, the name of that which has no relation to existence.’ ‘La meilleure image du Moi est bien le Zero.’ The best image of the I indeed is Zero.

But then he did not know, or remember, if you like, – zero itself, the very word, is linguistically and historically a child of India, through its many itinerant transformations, sūnyāta, pure emptiness equates Nirvana. Pure ego then is the state of being, in its natural state, the condition of the end of Becoming, as the Buddha has defined. And later, in his celebrated hymn, the Nirvanashatakam, Shri Shankara the greatest sage and metaphysician after the Buddha, has sung, \textit{Mano Budhi ahankara chittani naham . . . Shivoham, Shivoham}. I am not the mind, intelligence, the myness, or conceptual activity . . . I am Shiva, I am Shiva, the Absolute.

What then this condition of pure being? There are many many statements on the Pure Ego state or the I state (to go back to Valery) but I will take the description from Mallarmé, that unique teacher, le Maitre of Paul Valéry – Mallarmé, the founder of modern poetry? There would never have been not only a Paul Valéry without Mallarmé, but neither Joyce nor Eliot, neither Stefan Georg – nor even Alexander Blok. Or again Rainer Maria Rilke.

‘Je viens de passer,’ Mallarmé wrote to his closest friend, the poet Henri Gazalis (Jean Lahor) ‘Une nuit effrayante: ma Pensée s’est pensée, et est arrivée à une Conception pure. Tout ce que, par contrecoup, mon être a souffert, pendant cette longue agonie est inénarable, mais, heureueusement, je suis parfaitement mort, et la région la plus impure ou mon Esprit puisse aventurer est l’éternité, mon Esprit, ce solitaire habituel de sa propre Pureté, que n’obscurcit plus le reflet du Temps.’

‘Malheureusement, j’en suis arrivé de la par une horrible sensibilité . . . Mais combien plus je l’étais il y a plusieurs mois, d’abord dans ma lutte avec ce vieux et méchant plumage terrassé heureueusement, Dieu, Mais, but the terrible fight against God took me to the Great Darkness, Ténèbres, after which the poet fell, ‘je
tombai, victorieux, eperdument et infiniment,' till one day he saw himself in a mirror and recognised himself as he was many months earlier. But, he continues, the devastation left by that experience was so great, if he were not before the mirror now, ‘I will rebecome nothingness: Je redeviendra le Néant.’ — ‘C’est t’apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel et non plus Stéfane que tu as connu mais une aptitude qu’a l’Univers spirituel à se voir et se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi.’ Then he goes on to say: Poetry takes the place in me of love, because it is, poetry is, is in love with itself, and its sensuousness falls deliciously on my soul. And he remarks, it would be a great and painful ‘serrement de cœur,’ despair, in case when he enters his supreme Disappearance, he had not finished his ‘work, which is The Work, the Great Work, as said the great alchemists, our ancestors.’

To another friend, also a poet, Eugene Lefébure, he writes: Destruction was my Beatrice. And in a letter to Villiers de l’Isle Adam, he states he would now like to write a book on Absolute Beauty. ‘You will be terrified to know that I have come to the Idea of the Universe only through sensation (and that, for example, to keep an ineffaceable notion of pure Nothingness, I had to impose on my mind the sensation of absolute emptiness.)’

And again and again Mallarmé protests, his Nothingness was not the Buddhist Nothingness. But does it matter? Where one is, is there a name, Buddhist or Non-Buddhist for that state. The Buddha, as all oriental scholars know, refused to name that condition. It is a state where every impression has vanished, except It. Isness is. Is is all that remains: the Pure Ego, of Valéry.

* * * * *

The ultimate word in reality is any word. For all words arise from this same Isness, and the end of the sound, sabda goes back to It. Hence this It is also called Sabdabrahman, the Brahman, the Absolute of the (Sounding) word. For inside of each one of us is the anahata, the unstruck sound, the active silence from which all sounds arise, as music or as word, the note of Valéry. In a penetrating essay, published by Christopher Middleton, on ‘Rilke’s Birth of Venus,’ he uncovers the sound structure of this poetic poem. And he comes to the conclusion that Rilke used AUM as the ‘nuclear sound pattern in the whole poem. One could extend this sound,’ continues Middleton, ‘to include the role of α as alpha and ω as omega in the pith series of German vowels: the first
and last things in the universe. With M as its axis, the poem would then
voice the equilibrium attained by the magical universe of the alphabet
at the moment of Aphrodite’s birth.

\[
\text{Aumkāra ātmaiva, samviṣat}
\]

So concludes the Mandukyopanishad, belonging to the Atharva Veda –
\[
\text{ātmanātmānam ya evam veda.}
\]

Aum indeed the I. He who knows it enters the I with his I. Thus I go to
where I am.

References

(1) Rig Veda Samhita.
(4) Bhartrihari by K. A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College, Poona.
(5) Vākyapadiya (I). Translated by K. A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College, Poona.
(6) Recherches Sur La Symbolique et L’Énergie De La Parole dans Certains Textes
Tantriques by André Padoux, de Boccard, Paris.
(9) Selected Writings of Paul Valéry, New Directions, New York.

Notes

1 Keynote address given at the South Asian Language Association Conference, at The
University of Texas at Austin, Spring 1984. Published in The Library Criterion, Bangalore

2 He becomes (transparent) like water, one the Seer without duality.

3 ‘Roses are sold everywhere. These people could not live without roses.’ Abdur Rezzak.

4 Études Vediques et Paninéennes. Paris, 1935. Its introduction has been the basis of
much of this section of my essay.

5 Vā.

6 ‘The day begins,’ says Valéry, in his famous journal, ‘the day begins with a light more
obscure than all of night . . . A man,’ he continues, ‘wakes up, it would seem, . . . in the
state of pure I.’ – ‘I am the analogue of what is. I am still, O delight, something equal to
the whole of fire, silk, clay, steam, and raw music together. I am an effect of light.’ ‘When
I feel at that hour (of dawn) the depth of appearance, (I do not know how to say it) – it is
this which is poetry.’
From whom I have taken many of these quotations.

I have just gone through a frightening year: my Thought thought itself and came to a pure conception. All that, as a consequence, my being has suffered, during that long agony, cannot be related, but happily, I am perfectly dead, and the most impure region where my spirit can adventure is Eternity, my Spirit, this solitary inhabitant of its own Purity, which no more obscures the reflection of time. Unhappily I came to it through an horrible sensibility. But how much more I was, some months ago, in the fight with that old wicked plumage, happily laid low; God. This is to let you know that I am now impersonal and not any more the Stéfane you have known – but an aptitude which the Spiritual Universe has to see itself and to develop, through that which was once I.’
In his Antimémoires, André Malraux attributes the following remark to his great-uncle: ‘The greatest mystery does not lie in the fact that we are thrown at random into the abundance of matter and the stars, but in the fact that within this prison we are able to draw forth from ourselves images that are sufficiently powerful to repudiate our nothingness.’ Reading these lines in the course of the text, one sees them merely as a passing reference to the concept of art as Anti-destiny, and to the development, in the Musée imaginaire and the Métamorphose des Dieux, of the theme of art as the privileged witness to human liberty. Yet this strange ‘power of images’ merits a closer look, at what it is and where it comes from. The intellectual space opened up by this question finds an attempted response in Novalis’ ‘productive heart’, which is viewed as the wellspring of images, the place where the questioner may dimly perceive a possible origin. According to the fragments destined by Novalis for an Encyclopædia, the productive heart is the force which is capable of transforming our vision of the world and of ourselves, the essential force of ‘magical idealism’. This is the magic of the imagination, in accordance with the formula which occurs so often in Jakob Böhme: Imago magia. The power of images refers us back, in a necessarily meandering fashion, to the imagination itself—an imagination obedient to the demands of creativity and able ultimately to dispense with images. This journey, which could be envisaged separately in the case of each art, takes poetry and poetic images as its principal thread and guide. There remains the final question: should one give in to the nostalgia inherent in any discourse on art, which always falls short of its object, and idolize the image? This is suggested in Paul Valéry’s humorous maxim that one should always avoid talking about painting. We all know how the endless chatter about art is somehow sacrilegious and unbearable. But the way taken by the
productive heart is different, and is defined by Henry Corbin when he opposes the idol to the icon: 'The ambiguity of the Image derives from the fact that it can be either an idol (the Greek eidolon) or an icon (the Greek eikon). It is an idol when the gaze of him who is contemplating it rests upon it and is halted there... But it is an icon... when its transparency enables the gazer to see through it and beyond it, and when that which is beyond it can only be perceived through it.' It is a question not of denying the specificity of poetry and of making it an adjunct to metaphysics, but of reading it in a way which, by locating the imagination at the heart of human existence, can explain the inestimable value that art possesses for humanity.

Is there not a contradiction in speaking of the 'power of images', in endowing such an impalpable thing as an image with power - particularly a poetic image? Yet we all remember the famous slogan written over so many walls in 1968: 'l'imagination au pouvoir!'. This may help us to define our problem. When the attempt was made to put imagination in power, imagination was perceived to be just what was lacking, and then disillusion set in with regard to power, which had also disappeared only to reappear in the firm hands of the administration. The enthusiastic and exhilarating slogan was based on a fundamental incompatibility. The power of images is a free power which cannot be invoked in the service of a political cause. Nothing is more devoid of imagination than collective statements. The 1968 slogan was a total failure in political terms, not to say in terms of the world of art and of ideas.

Nevertheless, poetic images in particular and artistic images in general indisputably possess the power to fascinate and to evoke, especially in relation to concepts. A concept says only what it says, and is always mediate. Hegel saw clearly that the essence of a concept is mediation, and he considered it immensely superior to 'representation' and 'image', which according to him are characteristic of religion and art. It is the opposite which strikes me, from the point of view not so much of the creator as of the amateur or spectator. There is a force in art which enlists the support of the reader or spectator: the poetic image makes palpable to us the presence of the inner emotion or of the external spectacle which is being evoked. This powerful presence of an absent reality, this sense of a truth which eludes discussion and eschews argument: these things the philosopher who is concerned, as
Novalis said, with the ‘theory of poetry’ must attempt to describe and explain.

Kant confined himself to noting the fact, and in his analysis of the judgement of taste he alludes to what he calls ‘universalité without concept’. Although I am unable to explain or prove anything, when I say (whether I am engaged in contemplating nature or reading a poem) ‘This is beautiful’, I am presupposing that all men must be able to say the same. This is not actual universalité, but a claim to universalité. It matters little whether the universalité of the judgement of taste is real or not: I claim universalité as of right, though I am unable to support that right. Where does this insane claim derive from – a claim to say the least highly paradoxical? It derives from the mysterious power of images, to which we must again return. Kant’s analysis draws a clear distinction between the beautiful and the pleasing; for if I say, ‘this pleases me’, I am not presuming universal acquiescence. But Kant does not take this distinction to its limit. Can I say of a poem that it is not beautiful but it pleases me? Assuredly not, although a woman could easily say it of a man. When it is a question of aesthetic images, merely subjective attractiveness is an impossibility. On the other hand, I can perfectly well say: this is a beautiful film, but it does not please me, meaning that it does not appeal to me. In this case, beauty is seen as a collection of objective and measurable qualities, but what is here in question is not true beauty in the real sense. True beauty goes beyond subjective and objective while at the same time it presupposes them. Aesthetic judgement implies subjective assent, as well as the sense that this assenting power touches at once what is most intimate and most human in me.

The power of images lies in being immediately convincing. This immediacy, which is both instantaneity and absence of conceptual mediation, could be defined as a quality of dawning. As an example, let us take a verse from Saint-John Perse’s Exile:

«Plus haute, chaque nuit, cette clameur muette sur mon seuil, plus haute,
chaque nuit, cette levée de siècles sous l’écaill,

Et, sur toutes grèves de ce monde, un iambique plus farouche à nourrir de mon être!…

Tant de hauteur n’épuisera la rive accore de ton seuil, ô Saisisseur de glaives à l’aurore,

Ô Manieur d’aigles par leurs angles, et Nourrisseur des filles les plus aigres sous la plume de fer!»
Toute chose à naitre horripile à l'orient du monde, toute chair naissante exulte aux premiers feux du jour!
Et voici qu'il s'élève une rumeur plus vaste par le monde, comme une insurrection de l'âme...»

...Higher, night by night, this silent clamour upon my sill, higher, night by night, this rising of the ages in their bristling scales, And on all the shores of the world a fiercer iambic verse to be fed from my being!...
So great an altitude can never annul the sheer fall from Thy sill, O Seizer of swords at dawn,
O Handler of eagles by their angles, Feeder of women shrill in their iron plumes!
All things at birth bristle to the east of the world, all flesh at birth exults in the first fires of day!
And here, a greater murmur is rising around the world, like an insurrection of the soul...

Everything here is imagery, and the flow of the images dominates each of them in such a way that any analytical examination would destroy their powerful unity. The immediate feeling is one of birth and of dawning. All poetry is 'at dawn', 'to the east of the world'... Of course, this birth, designated here by the image of the sill, may well be illusory–Yves Bonnefoy* situates poetry 'in the trap of the threshold'. ('Dans le leurre du Seuil') Where, then, does this fascination spring from for all that is nascent, whose model is the poetic image? The birth of a poem may be painful for the poet, who seizes the sword by the blade and feels its burning feather, but for the reader of the poem its birth within him is a gift of pure grace, what Hegel called a 'gift of destiny'. The poem when complete retains, through the immediacy of the images, something of the state of being born, of the dawn and of springtime, as though the poet in the pain of creation had extended an infinite love to his readers.
To assent to poetic images is to consent to this infinite Love, at the heart of which we experience ourselves as we should be and not as we are. True, to accept the poetic image as a gift implies that one is prepared for it, and that through having truly made an effort to read, approach and familiarize oneself, one has deserved the freely-given gift of the image. This is what Rilke means in his Letters to a Young Poet when he says that

*See Temenos 6
art demands as much from its faithful admirers as from its creators. One can say of poetry above all other arts, as did Rilke who was hostile to all critical procedures, that one has to love a poem in order to understand it, not understand it in order to love it. The power of images in their immediacy is an invitation to love, amidst the fog of an understanding which is obscure to start with and is progressively illuminated. To try to understand from the start is in fact an attitude of refusal towards poetry: it cannot lead to an experience of it, but only to an analytical study of the poetic text – in short, to its destruction.

When a woman says to a man, ‘I don’t understand you’, she means, ‘I don’t love you’; and conversely, when she says to him, ‘You don’t understand me’, she means quite simply, ‘You don’t love me’. Understanding without love is inconceivable in the case of the woman, and the same applies to poetry. The power of images is that they invite us to consent to the most intimate part of ourselves, to the feminine, poetic aspect of ourselves. The similarity between a relationship with poetry and a relationship with a woman seems to me to indicate their profound affinity, or at any rate to indicate that poetry is always feminine. That is to say that it is both paradisal and fragile: paradisal in its nascent innocence, like Venus rising from the waves, and fragile because it is threatened by our clodhopping feet, our too brutal grasp, and in particular the grasp of our concepts – Begriffe as the Germans say, from begreifen, to seize.

The power of images is made up of this fragility and this seductiveness, and is thereby absolutely divorced from power of a political kind. Is it a question of psychological ‘hold’ in the sense in which Freud and the psychoanalysts speak of the ‘will to mastery’ or of the ‘relationship of possessiveness’? This Benachtiungstrieb designates a desire to grasp, to appropriate, referring to an authority which images do not at all possess. With poetry it is otherwise. For example, let us look at two lines from the beginning of Baudelaire’s Flacon:

Il est de forts parfums pour qui toute matière
Est poreuse. On dirait qu’ils pénètrent le verre.

(There are some perfumes so powerful that all material is porous for them. They seem even to penetrate glass.)

The poetry invites us through a deliberate sonority, strange and a little frail. There is no question of grasping: we feel completely at liberty to
love or to refuse. This enables us to define the nature of the image, in
this case the perfume and the glass bottle. In its very imprecision and
generality, the poetic evocation is perceived as sign and as weakness.
The image is immediate in relation to the concept, but not in relation to
the pure feeling which it evokes. The writer and poet Yves Bonnefoy is
in a sense jealous of the painter's ability to realize immediate images.
Writing of Poussin in l'Arrière-Pays (Skira-Champs, Flammarion, 1982),
he says: 'Certain works, however, convey the idea of an impossible
potentiality. The blue of Poussin's Bacchanlia with lute-player has the
stormy immediacy, the non-conceptual perceptiveness which our
awareness as a whole ought to possess'.

The poetic image does not possess the immediate presence of a
feature in a painting. It is an absent presence, like Baudelaire's strong
perfumes. We can speak of it in terms of seduction, because what it
shows does not reveal all. As with feminine guiles, the reader of the
poem thinks he has granted it and then realizes that he is holding
nothing. The more mysterious the seductress, the more power she
wields. The poetic image seduces unawares and in this again it is
feminine: the sheer grace of its presence amounts to seduction. To
seduce is to separate, to take someone out of the direct way, to
encourage detours. No one would deny that poetry exerizes this sort
of seduction: it separates one from the everyday world, whose
presence is experienced as superficial and lacking the density confer-
red by symbols; it turns language away from its utilitarian goals, from its
rôle as communication with a view to action. It fascinates us by its
freedom from regard to present necessity. This poetic seduction is the
subject of Baudelaire’s famous Invitation to Voyage:

Mon enfant, ma sœur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble.
Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir,
Au pays qui te ressemble.

My child, my sister,
Think of the delight
Of going far off and living together!
Of loving peacefully,
Loving and dying
In the land that bears your resemblance!
It is striking to see how literary criticism tacks on two ideas to this lovely poem: firstly, that it is a love poem addressed to an idealized woman, and secondly, that it reveals a Platonic cult of beauty. What matters here is that the poem could equally well be addressed to poetry itself as to a woman. Nothing would need to be altered, if the child symbolized the poem and the sister poetry. To call the beloved woman ‘my child, my sister’ is to play in several registers. And in thinking of poetry, we need only remember Goethe’s ‘Poetry is deliverance’ in order to imagine that other place, that ‘far off’.

Up until now, we have attempted only a step-by-step phenomenological analysis of the singular power of poetic images. The attempt to explain this power has always been undertaken from a psychological point of view, which is the view adopted by that great lover of poetic images, Gaston Bachelard. We must of course pass over all the individual psychoanalyses of poets which can be traced in their works, and which is of no interest whatsoever since it explains everything except poetic genius and the power of images. This power can more plausibly be attributed to the great myths of humanity, which each poet rediscovers in his own way. Jung’s contribution was to show that the images which haunted patients starting analysis with him were not just individual; they harked back to archetypes, that is to say to sequences of images which summed up the ancestral experience of man confronted by a ‘typical situation’, in circumstances which are not peculiar to one individual but which can apply to all. The power of the images derived from this osmosis between the individual unconscious and that great storehouse of archetypal images, the collective unconscious. But here again there has to be a modification: Jung sought to explain the fascination for his patients of images such as woman, sword or crystal, but in neurosis these images are death-bringing and alienating, whereas in poetry they are liberating and free. In Bachelard’s use of poetic images there is a certain ambiguity. For him, poetry is the fruit of the supernatural aspect of the imagination, of an imagination, that is, which is free and perpetually innovative. According to the Poétique du Phénix, an unpublished manuscript, poetry is ‘language which is free in relation to itself’. In La Flamme d’une Chandelle he speaks of ‘the freedom of reverie, that freedom which comes too easily to a solitary man’. Whereas the Jungian analyst invites us to the waking dream, the phenomenologist of poetry invites us to the waking reverie — in other words, he invites us to
consent to poetic images and their suggestions, to follow the flow of the active imagination. It is a question not of evasion, but of poetic liberation, with the aim of rediscovering what Rilke so beautifully and profoundly called the ‘heart’s beginning’. But Bachelard’s reverie ends in a ‘collection of images’, and we are a little disappointed in the power accorded to images when we finally see them arranged in the pages of a nice catalogue of the happy imagination. In the place of images which are powerful enough to refute our nothingness, we are invited to go browsing among poetry books, taking a naive pleasure in poetic images for our greater satisfaction. Thus we go from the alienating power of images in neurosis to their euphoric power for the philosopher who is also a voracious reader!

To help us avoid this alternative, let us turn to Jakob Böhme or Victor Hugo. During the first session of the University of Saint John of Jerusalem* at Cambrai in 1974, I opposed Böhme’s concept of the imagination to Bachelard’s. Bachelard saw only the pleasant side of images, and we must restore to its rightful status their aspect of violence and tragedy. Bachelard, indeed, wanted to go beyond the psychological level of poetry analysis, and he speaks of ‘pure sublimation’: ‘Sublimation in poetry dominates the psychology of the soul filled with earthly unhappiness. It is a fact that poetry possesses a joy which is inherent in it, no matter what tragedy it is called upon to depict.’ We may wonder whether to sublimate all conflict is not tantamount to abolishing life. Is not the little world of images powerless before the violence of the conflicts that sweep us away? Bachelard sees in images only the power of repose, or rather, a power which guides the soul to its resting-place, to ‘paradise’ itself.

We are reminded of Hölderlin’s phrase in Hyperion: ‘The man who dreams is a god, he who thinks is a beggar.’ Diotima writes to Hyperion: ‘Whoever like you has experienced death can find healing only among the gods. Happy are those who do not understand you! Whoever understands you cannot but share in your greatness and your despair’. It must be understood that the power of poetic images is to magnify, to celebrate as Rilke would say, joy as well as sorrow, the peace of human life as well as its tragedy. Far from effacing, this power transports them to a higher dimension of awareness. Bachelard quotes some lines from

*Established by Henry Corbin
Hugo's notebooks of 1833, in which one evening, at Nemours, he allows himself 'to be gently penetrated by this inexpressible combination, by the serenity of the heavens, by the melancholy of the moment'. But for one reverie of melancholy peace, how many terrors and reveries of chaos Hugo experienced, even in the contemplation of nature! For example, he writes in his *Voyage aux Pyrénées*, beside the stream of Marcadau: 'It is a sort of pallid night shot through with lightning, in which two roars only are audible: the ceaselessly howling torrent and the thunder which rumbles at every instant. I was dreaming of these two sounds, and thought: "The torrent resembles rage and the thunder is like anger."' In this reverie the tendency is towards the tragic, and the conflict is not sublimated. And, curiously enough, Bachelard quotes from *L'homme qui Rit*, a gloomy novel which Henri Meschonnic has called *Le livre de l'engloutissement* (the book that engulfs), a remark relating to the doctor's meditations: 'The sea observed is a reverie.' But if we turn to the text, we read the following: 'And the doctor, recalled by the obscure workings of his spirit, descended once more into his thoughts like a miner into his shaft. His meditations in no way prevented him from observing the sea. The sea observed is a reverie.' Whoever has read no matter how little Hugo, knows what reverie he is talking about here: the first book of *L'homme qui Rit* is entitled 'The Sea and the Night'. Reverie and meditation are connected with the burying of thought in itself, as in the first line of 'What the mouth of shadow said':

*L'homme en songeant descend an gouffre universel.*

*Man when he dreams descends into the universal abyss.*

For Hugo, reverie is the mouth of the abyss. The power of images is far greater than Bachelard believes. In *William Shakespeare*, Hugo explains: 'To dream is to think both here and there.' And again, 'The extent of the possible is in some sense before your very eyes. The dream within, you find outside also.'

To end this examination of Gaston Bachelard, let us turn to the very Hugo-esque poem by Baudelaire, 'Man and the sea', recalled in its rhythmic power which revives Hugo's imagery. It dates from 1852, when Hugo was in exile – the question of reciprocal influences is of no concern here:
Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!
La mer est ton miroir; tu contemples ton âme
Dans le déroulement infini de sa lame,
Et ton esprit n'est pas un gouffre moins amer.

Free man, you will always cherish the sea!
The sea is your mirror; you contemplate your soul
In the infinite rolling of its surface,
And your spirit is not a less bitter abyss. –

– the freedom of reverie over the bitterness of the abyss within.

Where, between the overwhelming power of images besieging a mind in distress, and the ineffectual flimsiness of pretty, meticulously collected images, can we truly situate the seductive power of images in poetry? Not in dissection, nor in classification: poetic images must here be taken as a whole, in the sense in which Hugo wrote: 'I don’t like verses; I like poetry.' Baudelaire gives us the answer metaphorically: images would be completely powerless if they were not ourselves. If the sea fascinates the poet because it is our image, the poetic image of the sea derives its power from the fact that it arouses some psychic response in the reader. We read into poetic images our own truth, which is hidden by all the superficial layers of life. Our assent is unarguable, because it is a question of our inner truth. By contrast, in philosophy assent presupposes discussion, which always remains a possibility. Let us be clear about this: if we seek in poetry for a therapeutic method which we can appropriate for ourselves, we will not find one, for the images will have lost their power. It is as a freely-given gift that poetry touches us, and the power of images is revealed only to the disinterested reader, who strips himself of himself and does not know beforehand why he is moved. In this sense we could say that the power of images removes all superficiality from poetry. In this respect there is no such thing as aristocratic culture and popular culture. Victor Hugo was uncompromisingly popular, Mallarmé not at all. It does not matter. Even a folk song, if it touches on this intimate truth and reflects it, back, is profound poetry. The only thing opposed to the depth of the power of images is word-play, which cannot find an echo in us.

Do we expect too much of psychology in thus seeking an explanation for the power of images? In fact, when we read poetry, what we encounter is a psychology of depth like that of the Kabbalah, which was
understood by Böhme, Novalis and Hugo. Poetry, in fact, rebels against any psychology which is scientific, descriptive, experimental or constructivist. The power of images derives from the individual centre which is present in each of us, our most profound and most fragile possession. Poetry is the intimate part of our soul which is always in need of protection, as Shelley well knew when he wrote his *Defence of Poesy*. Here, it seems to me, we go further than any explanation of the magic of imagery through myths. Poetry cannot be explained by sociology, even the sociology of myth. Of course, poetry shares with myth the fact that it is representation and discourse. But we know that a myth only derives its efficacy from the ritual that gave it birth. Since myth is ritual transposed into discourse, it can give place, through a gradual process of intellectualization, to poems like those of Hesiod, to gnomic maxims — resembling poetic fragments — such as those of Heraclitus, or to philosophical poems like those of Parmenides or Lucretius. None of this explains the magic of images. The power of poetic images does not derive from the collective unconscious, because these images do not function as signs destined to arouse immediate and unreflecting reactions. On the contrary, it touches on the most profound part of our humanity: the poet expresses better than I could have done what I feel within myself obscurely, and he goes unhesitatingly to the heart of the matter.

Such is the mysterious power exercised by poetic images on the reader and lover of poetry. This power is irrefutable, and is not to be understood by subjecting each separate image to a chemico-linguistic analysis. The power only exists in so far as the poetry exists, taken as a global whole. Poetic images are simply the most obvious aspect of the poetic text. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Yves Bonnefoy spoke admirably on the subject: 'I call by the name of image that impression of reality which is ultimately fully incarnate, and which reaches us, paradoxically, through words which avoid incarnation. I am speaking of images, world-images, in the sense in which I believe Baudelaire intended when he wrote, during the most tormented stage of his poetic intuition, “Le culte des images, ma grande, mon unique, ma primitive passion”. Images are the brightness that is missing from the dull day, but which can occur in language when the constant
yearning after a dream turns back upon itself and kneads it like a nursing breast.' Ultimately, poetry could dispense with images without being itself any less an image in this sense.

How does the poet come to create images which are powerful enough to refute our nothingness? To ask this question is to do as Novalis hoped when he wrote, in a fragment modestly entitled Anecdotes: 'Poetry is the hero of philosophy. Philosophy elevates poetry into a principle. It makes us understand the value of poetry. Philosophy is the theory of poetry.' ('Die Poesie ist der Held der Philosophie. Die Philosophie erhebt die Poesie zu Grundsatz. Sie Lehrt uns den Werth der Poesie kennen. Philosophie ist die Theorie der Poesie.') In fact, the 'active principle' is the imagination (die Einbildungskraft ist das wirkende Prinzip). We should observe that the German term Einbildungs-kraft contains the word for force, Kraft, and means more or less the force of putting into images. But Einbildung is also in-formation, the division into forms, and Schelling's philosophy of art does no more than analyse the different modalities of the information of the infinite in the finite. For Novalis, the imagination can also be called from the religious point of view der produktive Herz, the 'productive heart'. This is the source of creation. The heart is productive in so far as it operates through love, or 'love is the principle of the possibility of magic. Love operates magically.' Magic is imagination regulated in accordance with the 'sympathy of the sign with that which is signified.' This is one of the fundamental ideas of the Kabbalah, according with the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. In Novalis the magical activity of the imagination takes on different aspects: alternative representation, moralizing, consumption and assimilation, with the magician – the poet – as the mediator of the world.

Nevertheless, Novalis throws considerable light on poetic creation when he says, 'The exterior is an interior raised to a condition of mystery' (something which could be applied to a work of poetry), and when he defines the inner world by the simple word vaterländisch, fatherland. The poetic function, no matter by what name it is known, is cosmogonic. The poet in his poetry is doing what Fichte does in voluntarist style: he brings the Non-I into conformity with the I through the ability to create images. He creates a structure of reversability between the world and his own heart, between the I and the Non-I. Everything has been said about romantic reflexiveness, at the start of the
modern age, in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* with its ‘science of science’ and Hölderlin’s ‘poetry of poetry’. And I will not go into Lucien Dallenbach’s subtle analyses in his work *Le Récit spéculaire*. I believe it would be more original to investigate not the mirror games within the work, but the specular relationship between the poet and the poem, which of course has nothing to do with biography. Novalis says that the philosopher-poet is ‘en état de créateur absolu’ ‘in the state of absolute creator’—these words are in French in the text. As I understand it, this means that the magic of the imagination consists in creating ex nihilo, and in creating in its own image.

Two stumbling-blocks are immediately apparent, the first of which is the accusation of rambling. Was it not Blake who wrote:

The idiot Reasoner laughs at the Man of Imagination,
And from laughter proceeds to murder by undervaluing calumny.

*(Milton 2.32. 1.6–7)*

Yet Blake, prophetic poet, seems certainly to be an ‘erratic prophet’. In reality, there is no rambling so long as the readers are able to confirm the poem’s inner reality. And, as we have seen, the power of images in poetry proves this reality to be totally opposed to that of sign-images in the socio-political field. Hugo was well aware that when poetry was associated with socio-political facts it must transform history into legend in order to discover its essential truth.

The second accusation is that of narcissism. If the creator creates a poem in his own image, if he projects into the work a reflection of himself as in a mirror, does not this amount to a fascination with one’s own image? Is not the truth that poetry gives us a perverted truth? This type of perverted narcissism is portrayed by Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. Dorian’s friend Henry congratulates him in the following terms: ‘You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad that you have never done anything… or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art.’ So what is the difference between creative narcissism and perverted narcissism? First and foremost, the difference lies in the work. The image of Narcissus and the fascination it possesses are caused by the evanescence of the mirror, the moving water. In the first verse of his *Narcissus* (April 1913), Rilke has a wonderful definition of the deathlike impalpability of one’s own image:
Dies also: dies geht von mir aus und löst
Sich in der Luft und im Gefühl der Haine,
entweicht mir leicht und wird nicht mehr das Meine
und glänzt, weil es auf keine Feindschaft stösst.

And so it keeps dissolving out of me
into the air and sympathetic trees,
withdraws from my possession by degrees
and luminously eludes all enmity.

tr. J. B. Leishman

Poetry cannot be translated, and I will not, therefore, attempt it. Rilke is saying that the image of Narcissus goes out of him and dissolves in air. The speaker is Narcissus, and he laments the fact that this — dies — which is not named as being as a reflection or image and which refers to the I itself — that this imponderable escapes me, ceases to be mine, and becomes luminous. The reason invoked or suggested for this is conclusive: it is through not encountering refusal, hostility (Feindschaft). The creator encounters both inner and outer when he is engaged on a work of imagination. Inner, because everything in one's upbringing and education is opposed to one's coming out of oneself and creating outside the accepted forms. Creation is of necessity a personal crisis, because one has to unbolt a certain number of doors. The outer hostility arises from the raw material of poetry, language, whose rebellious and collective nature needs to be tamed and personalized. The inner conflicts are indubitably the most powerful, because the strength of the imagination must be such as to force the creator to bare himself to the eyes of men in his creation.

The work is the ἔργον which distinguishes between ποιεῖν, production, ποίγμα and ποίγμα, and mere πράττειν, meaning to act. Plato's Charmides (163 B.C.), in the course of an exegesis of Hesiod's maxim ἔργον οὐδέν εἶναι ὣνειδός (no work is dishonourable), says that ἔργον exists when it is a question of τὰ καλὰ τε καὶ ἱσόμενοι, in other words the production of beautiful and useful things. Actually, the word 'work', which many people who write refuse to use because of the psychological weight it carries, means both the result of the 'productive heart', the end of the imaginative process, and the recognition of oneself in the work in question. Poiesis is the complex
unfolding of a man who contains a world within himself, objectifies it, and recognizes himself in it before the eyes of men. Form, be it language, stone or sound, always implies a potential audience. Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre Inconnu* shows the painter Frenhofer's radical refusal of an audience, and the corresponding impossibility of creating a true œuvre, a work, and of living. Balzac had the genius unconsciously to apply the myth of Narcissus to the artist himself. The painter's concern with perfection is in fact no more than superficial, even an excuse. The truth is that he is henceforth unable to renounce his fascination with himself: the work is merely a frail screen between me and you, and the fire puts an end both to this work and to the painter's life, whose suicide is a method of finding himself in the absence of work or audience. Here again it is the audience which saves the creative imagination from madness. This is not to say that the creator must be subject to the audience. As Lou Andreas-Salome* has said, 'Without realizing it, the artist contains his audience within himself, carries it around with him, and this is most of all the case when he is least aware of it, absorbed as he is in the act of creation.'

Lou Andreas-Salomé is the first and almost the only person to have pointed out the twofold nature of narcissism, and she stresses the fact that every creator is of necessity narcissistic, but in a positive sense. This, quite simply, is a serious attempt to understand what has been said so often – by Michelet, for example, for whom 'to create is to be God', or by Victor Hugo when he writes about genius in his *William Shakespeare*: 'The I of one man is even vaster and more profound than the I of a whole people.' As Lou has subtly observed, the ambivalence of narcissism is present in the myth itself: the mirror in which Narcissus sees his own image is not artificial: it is water, the symbol of nature and of life. Narcissus is fascinated and drowns in his own image because the active imagination is not strong enough to make him project his own image into nature and life, into the Non-I in general – that is, to effect the ποίησις from which all poetry is born. What distorts this argument is the moral connotation of narcissism as egoism or self-indulgence. Long before psychoanalysis, it was perfectly possible to distinguish a healthy love of self from egoism. In fact, the productive or poetic heart is filled with self-abnegation, and the realization of a work, whatever

*Friend of Neitzsche, Rilke and Freud*
the creator's capabilities, is always an austere discipline. In psychoanalytical terms, the creator goes beyond infantile narcissism and auto-erotic self-love.

It is now clear why the productive heart is simultaneously joyful and nostalgic. It is joyful because its objectifying power creates a sort of idyllic state between itself and the world. Hugo's invocation to the bees in his Châtiments could equally well be addressed to the poet:

Oh you whose labour is joy!...

To convert labour to joy is not a facile alchemy, even for the creative imagination. To quote Malraux once more, joy is precisely the drawing out of oneself of images which are powerful enough to refute our nothingness. As we have seen, these images are images of ourself; yet at the same time they do not exist prior to the realization of the work. This is the source of joy. Creation is the triumph over inertia and immobility, and joy is the sign of creation, the sign that our goal has been attained. Joy is going beyond the self in the work. And having attained this joy, one can proceed like Baudelaire to exalt the imagination, 'queen of all the faculties,' who unites contraries and surpasses visible reality: 'The imagination is the queen of truth...It is positively related to infinity.' Yet in spite of this joyful celebration, Baudelaire admitted in the Salon of 1859 that the imagination is a 'mysterious faculty'. The joy of the productive heart can be recorded, but not explained.

This is the source of nostalgia. Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit..., wrote Hölderlin: what good are poets in times of misery? Is not the joy of creation just an indication of impotence in the socio-political field? Worse still, is it not simply illusion, a discourse of substitution, implying, in the words of Pierre-Jean Labarrière, 'wrenching something imaginatively from the poverty of the times'? Baudelaire's case is not itself reassuring, however one interprets his morbid personality and sense of decay. In reality all poetry is nostalgic, the fruit of an imaginative activity that we feel to be fundamental without being able to explain it. There is no method whereby one can become a poet. We touch simultaneously on the depth and the mystery.

At this point we must decide whether poetry is an idol or an icon. To think of it as an icon means to read it as a message, as transparent to something other than itself, something which I shall call, like Hegel, absolute Spirit. To make an idol of it is to say that it is sufficient to itself,
that it contains its raison d'être within itself, that it is not subject to any authority outside itself.

How can poetry be an idol? It is an idol when the image in it, or when the poem as image, is regarded as absolute. Poetry itself is the source of the revolt against images and the refusal to be idolized. In the Leçon mentioned above, Yves Bonnefoy goes as far as to speak of a ‘war against the image’ out of which modern poetry will be created. This war against the image is ‘for the sake of presence’. The status of the image is clear: when regarded as absolute, images are powers of deception, in that they refuse to acknowledge the mystery lying at their source. No one has better defined the problem, in his own time and way, than Hugo in William Shakespeare. Where does inspiration come from? he asks. And he answers, from genius. Where does genius come from? He answers, from mystery. The wish to resolve the fundamental opacity which is the basis of all poetry is to make an idol of it.

The power of images is the power of truth, in that it witnesses to a human experience whose self-transcendence is present in itself. The adoration of poetry is idolatry and perdition. On the other hand, the images which are sufficiently powerful to refute our nothingness may be regarded as so many efforts on the part of man to fight against death. This is not idolatry or evasion, but simply the acute awareness that our condition is one of exile; the power of images, as of reflection, bestow on us both the melancholy understanding of our limitations and the joyful possibility of transcending them.

Translated by Liadain Sherrard
The Difficult Passage

Living among fairy tales and religions, passing amid legends, cities and peoples, I also heard about a bridge no wider than a razor’s edge. Only by that bridge they say can you pass toward light. But as the wisest explain, you can cross that bridge only if you are yourself light.

Mycenae

We arrive at noon and mount up toward the palaces of Agamemnon, the cistern and the ancient walls. I pass through the Gate of the Lions, always for the last time. Huge heroic stones, and yet the East Gate shows that their heroes were no taller than I, more or less. O sun, my primordial golden mask, I take you off, step here into the enormous tomb, proceed, and discern a new gate to my right, smaller still, and stop and am mirrored

in darkness: Darkness.

Mirrors

In most men you see yourself ‘as in a glass darkly.’ Almost always before you, narrow windows, cracked or blurred, stand or pass. And I think that the presence of God or, as they say, the Day of Judgement, shall be nothing more than a clear, large mirror where you shall see yourself from head to toe, and rejoice in the essence of your presence with crystal clarity.
Waterspout

Where foam-white openwork
Rumples over slate,
Flash of a fork, the first
Wild syllables in flight,
The massive misty forces
Here to be faced are not
Of wind or water quite
So much as thought uptwisted
Helplessly by thought,
A fullblown argument
Sucked racing through whose veins
Whitebait and jellyfish
Repeat the lacy helices
Of a Murano — wait:
Spirits intoxicate
The drinker, not the glass;
Yet goblets — three of them —
Weave up to be counted
Like drunks in the stormlight.
Self-dramatizing scene
That cries and reels and clouds . . .
From somewhere above clouds,
Above thunder and levin
And the herring gull’s high scream
(At which one glass may seem
To shatter), from this heaven
Slaked by the spinal fluid,
A bright-eyed reveller
Looks down on cloth outspread,
Strewn silver, fruits de mer,
The lighthouse salt-cellar —
A world exhausted, drained
But, like his word, unbroken;
Looks down and keeps his head.
You don’t believe my traveller’s tales, you won’t allow
Quintilius knew Kitaj, crossed Gobi, sojourned in ancient Chu,
The Southern Cities, with Seres drank old green wine.
Whatever you may say, the opposite is true, old Proverb.
In a forgotten ancient time – it still exists –
Men loved, more even than they feared, or knew,
Mysterious Nature that surrounded them with sounds
And sights that took their breath away yet gave
Them life beyond their life. Shaman or sage,
Child of the first God (the Poet, if you will),
Sings himself upon his boat up rivers,
Across great lakes, past wooded islands
To the source; senses the brooding presence,
Feels, hears, – at times perhaps even sees
Invisible, inaudible, ineffable, bright beings
More real than himself. Bird notes, descanting gales,
Snap of a twig, skreik of two rubbing branches,
Fall of the mountain torrent on bare rock,
Call of nocturnal beasts, harsh stridulation
Of insects, talk in one language to him –
The silences, the pauses, reverberating, speak in another.
What are they saying – these, the urgent Presences,
Invisible garlands, flowery crowns, the unheard
Tinkling lithophones of swaying dried-grass skirts?
I who have crossed the Great Desert and taken my Dragon Boat
Past Doubting Mountain over the shallow stones
Have heard these silences that tell a tale.
In Rome’s fine wineshops the pimps and the whores
Are nudging each other, trading their knowing looks,
And the professors in marble halls are shaking their heads:
‘Quintilius is mad. He dreams of spirits, of fauns and of dryads.’
A stony indifferent face is all that they see in nature,
A wheel spinning at random they worship as Fortuna,
The old Cow who hands out sometimes. This is because
They have looked alone in their own dim mirrors
And see nothing beside themselves, – blind white fish
In their underground caverns. I see
Eyes dark with longing. Mei-mei-ren Herself.
I am no longer to be seen in my ancient mirror,
And I rejoice. These eyes are the eyes of the world.
I distinguish my feelings of subjection to pleasure or pain
From the divine manner of knowing, independent of objects.

‘Even the Si-ming can do nothing for you,
If the sickness has got in your bones.’

Love of money and power and sense has closed up the mind of man
To all that is higher than him. Love of the phantastikon
Has opened his sick soul up to all that’s beneath him.
Ignorance, I find, is the failure to distinguish the body and soul-sense
From the nous, the divine manna of knowing.
What use is the raft when you land on the farther shore?
Even if one propped the Sea Dragon’s mouth open with it
To stop him closing his jaws. Aristo was frightened
That whatever was real in himself, when he passed out of body
And soul-sense, would be annihilated. I ask,
Which is it better to be, – a drop diffused through the whole Ocean,
Or the only rock on the shore? Cold Mountain,
Doubting Mountain, Black Mountain. Make choice.
I am an old sun, I have traversed many times
The Gulf of Brightness to the Vale of Murk.
The walls and trees are covered with delightful poems,
Spleenwort, pennywort, violets, moss.
The books are all deformations. Janua Coeli,
Diana the Virgin, pure contemplation.
Towards evening there was thunder and lightning. What was the King’s sorrow?
Who built the ten-storied tower of jade none of the learned can tell,
But the Lord of Song’s beautiful daughter knows it as I do,
Who sent the swallow-bird’s egg, the golden rain,
To impregnate her? That was a God.
And the ten stories are the way up through the pot lid
Into the open. The lion roars and I am content –
The City has nothing to say. The bird on the tree top
Is not singing to me or even for himself, but he sings
‘This self is not my self.’ And I remember:
How Ambrose wrote to Augustine ‘All that is true,
Whoever it’s uttered by, comes from the Spirit.’
There vice nor virtue never enters in – as the wise Goth said.
And I’m flying around the Heavens like the Ravens of ten suns.
I don’t expect you to understand my poems, I only ask you
To stand in the Presence . . .
Poetry and Liberation: a Point of View

SISIR KUMAR GHOSE

The Muses and the modern temper have been at odds from the start. Modern poetry is almost a contradiction in terms. Did not the Royal Society cheerfully declare the death of poetry, in fact offer to act as the hangman? In the thirties I. A. Richards had denied the 'referential' value of poetry. It was only emotive. The point had been made, a little differently, by Peacock: 'As civilisation advances, poetry declines,' a charming definition of poetry and civilization indeed! Not that the statement went unchallenged. One of the immediate results was Shelley's immortal Defence of Poetry.

But long before Shelley, in the Indian view of the matter we come across a firmly grounded, tested rationale of poetry as one with Being and Existence, as the language of man's growing self and self-awareness. A celebration of consciousness, the values of the Vedic Age were the products of poetic insight. Acknowledged legislators of the community, the poets have been our Founding Fathers. The visionary is still a son of the soil.

The grounds of Being, the human potentials, are the same everywhere, in all men. And liberation, Abhinavagupta said long ago, is the true nature of man. It is for us to develop or not to develop our true nature. The development has degrees, peak upon peak, an unlimited variety. It is not a single track. This is how Wordsworth records one of the peaks, the change in perception:

How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted:— and how exquisitely, too—
Theme this but little heard of among men—
The external World is fitted to the Mind.

The 'fitting' is part of a doctrine of destiny. The significance of our existence determines our destiny. As Elizabeth Sewell (The Orphic Voice) has shown, 'an immense theme lies here, the relation of creation,
poetry, to the Logos'. Standing before the creative principle of the universe, one has to decide.

The older Indian poets, rsayo divyah, had chosen, had decided to scale the hills of Being. They had made a series of discoveries or self-discoveries still pertinent and which we deny at our peril. To mention four of these: nityoanityam, chetanamschetanam, So'ham and Aham Brahmasmi, the one Eternal in many transients, the One Consciousness among many consciousnesses, He am I and I am Brahman. These realisations, not negligible for the life of man, were poetic experiences, of what Abraham Maslow has called self-actualisation. As Existence-clarification, these insights represent a total, sacramental view of reality, a view that can always resurrect.

And the beautiful river still flows,
And makes us part of it and part of him.
That, children, is what is called
A sacramental relationship.
And that is what a poet is,
Children, one who makes
A sacramental relationship.

George Seferis, the Greek poet, speaks for all poets. If these poets speak with a certain authority it is because they know what they are talking of. And that is why whatever the medium, in the older view art was a giver of freedom, muktipradayi. The image of a Shiva or a Buddha was the image of the free to help you to become free. Of course the poem had not only to mean but be. Mantra took care of that, a significant form of vision.

Man liberates the spirit by realising it. To realise is to embody. In a not unworthy sense the poet is a messenger of meaning. Not that other kinds of poetry, less elevated, have no right to exist. But this is the poetry of poetry just as it is the life of life. The Orphic tradition asserts a truth at once pre- and post-logical, pre- and post-historical. The tradition is not dead. You are always free to be free. As soon as you activate that dimension or energy-field you become a poet, whether you write poems or not.

The tradition survives among modern poets no less. Take the barbaric Whitman singing of himself. Here is a sophisticated version from Robert Penn Warren:

... And the lesson is that the only
Thing in life is glory. That is the hard
Thing to learn and the hard fact to face.
For it knocks society's values to a cocked hat,  
Or seems to, for the one thing that man fears  
Is the terror of salvation and the face  
Of glory.

The lasting lesson of poetry, its 'face of glory', we find among masters widely different and coming from different times and places: Thyagaraja, Milarepa, Nanak, Kabir, Rilke, Hölderlin, Tagore and others. It is the same speech, only the dialects differ. The freedom of poetry or the poetry of freedom is intrinsic to man. We must be free or die.

Our present day ethos is antipathetic to the poetry of vision. In his Poetry and Scepticism D. G. James had argued that it is impossible to claim that the imagination can give us truth. The reflections of Keats, whom he gives due respect, did not make that claim. Admitting that thesis, we can make one or two points to put the matter straight. The romantic vision was fragmentary, temperamental, unrepresentative. The glimpses were marvellous but momentary. They were not part of a valid or validated science of the Self. The idea and experience of a subjective Self had disappeared from the West. The fully grown romantic turns into the Rishi. It was Blake alone who seemed to know what was missing and where to find it. He made his Ezekiel say: 'The Philosophy of the East taught the first principles of human perception.' For Blake 'human' meant poetic. 'The Poetic Genius is the true Person,' is another saying of Blake's wisdom which agrees at heart with the Indian view. In a Semitic or scientific culture vision, especially the vision of identity, would be heresy. Mansur al-Hallaj had to pay with his life for saying 'I am the creative Truth' (ana'1 haqq). Would the mystic fare any better in our multiplying Animal Farm or Brave New World? But India, and the East, the mystical tradition, takes another view. Expansion of awareness (chitta vistara) and knowledge by identity (ekatmabodh) are taken to be the Final End of man. The cognitive knowledge of the seer-poets was not imagination, which St Teresa has called the fool in the house. To believe Kant, imagination was the empress of illusions. When the Rishi said 'I have known (Vedahametam) the Solar Person beyond the dark night' he was not imagining. On that razor's edge of spiritual experience, many of us would find breathing difficult. Self-knowledge is not a child's plaything.

What we are trying to say can be put simply. In the end all poetry is poetry of the Self. But the self of man is not an object, not on the
surface. As Christopher Fry put it: 'There is nothing on earth that does not happen in your heart.' If you call this subjective, we shall not quarrel. The earliest prayer of the awakened human soul has ever been: 'Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality.' But who shall define the Real? Not even poetry can do that. The Real is both a paradox and beyond every paradox. The human journey is at once near and far, taddure tadvantike. A Lao-tzu or a Ramana Maharshi does not have to take a single step outward. The whole world, visible and invisible, enters into them through the inner eye. This forces us to assume a still centre, what Shelley called a being within being. At the Centre all the contraries cease, 'is' is also 'is not', the many the silent One. It is part of poetry's essential paradox that the Light is born out of the Night, per tenebris ad lucem. The moderns make much of Nothingness as if it were their monopoly. But the soul's debate with Nothingness is old indeed, as Katha Upanishad will show. What we make of Nothingness rather than what Nothingness makes of us is important. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri is virtually a long dialogue with Death in search of Immortality.

Listen to the Nasadiya Sukta on the primal paradox: 'In the beginning there was neither world, nor sky. Non-being then was not, nor being.' Here is St John of the Cross:

Never was night so clear, undimmed and bright
From it alone, I know, proceeds all light
Although it's night.

So we arrive at the crowning poetic experience of the Mother of Gods, Aditi, mata devanam aditer anikam. In a sense all poets are Mother-worshippers. The Mother of God is the master of our souls, wrote Meister Eckhart. The Tantrics would have applauded. The Creatrix does not fashion illusions only. The world is real because She is real. There is poetry in the world because there is poetry beyond the world, at the source.

The becoming of Being is not a phrase but a realised fact. Creation, or manifestation, is not an alienation but a sacrifice, whose end is a reintegration of personality. If existence is indivisible, the not-self is also you. I am in all and all is in me. Here, in man's cosmic consciousness, is the death knell of duality, the mark of the modern and their 'sweated selves'. The poetry of vision removes the stigma by removing the cause, what the sufi calls the wounds of separation.
It also links time with the timeless. Yeats knew that 'man is in love and loves what vanishes'. Yet in a deeper view flux might be part of a process or programme. Evolution, as Teilhard de Chardin has said, is holy. And we are evolution. Shall we one day make history hierophany? That would be the last triumph of poetry, Paradise Regained. A festival of catharsis, poetry redeems the world from decay, retrieves the telos of the universe. Indications are not wanting. In a flash Wordsworth had seen the mystery of the One and the Many as if –

Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

As the philosopher Heidegger has said, unconsciously echoing the Vedic truth, poetry established Being with the help of the rhythmic word. So it is that the poets have asked us to look at the world as God's own poem: pasya devasya kavya. This was Hopkins's cry too, but more tortured. His was a divided soul: half pagan, half Christian. The world, he said, was 'charged with the grandeur of God'. Not grandeur only, but also the glory of freedom. As Brother Antoninus had said centuries before: 'God wrote the mark of Liberation everywhere on the wondering human face.' In Indian iconography the ideal man's face is always serene, above the battle.

You not only create but also enjoy in freedom, through detachment, another lesson hard to learn. The Being not only is, it is also supremely conscious. How can there be detachment without consciousness? There are, as ancient psychology knew, levels of the self: waking, sleeping, dreaming, and even beyond. If we could but harmonise the levels, it would mean poetry of a kind we cannot even imagine.

The other, the third power of Being, Ananda, the delight of self-existence, is never forgotten. Simply, the free self is the delight self; a discovery that man as poet cannot help making. If he fails, he fails. Ananda, however, is not pleasure. Nor does it imply any retreat from the world of struggle and action, a charge often made against the Indian world-view. True, the tradition has its ambivalence. Many have looked upon Mahabharata as a sermon on passivity and renunciation, vairagya. But the Gita would seem to recommend non-attached action, muktasya karma. Indian aesthetics has not hesitated to combine santa and vira rasa, the quiet and
the heroic. This may be difficult, but who can deny that it is desirable? Annie Besant once said: 'He who has read the Gita can stand unshaken amid the crash of breaking worlds.' Poetry is not for coward souls.

Though poetry cannot be equated glibly with a primer of ethics or a science of salvation, it alters the human image and prospect. Creative activity easily releases one from the bondage of ego. Also, after a while it takes away from us the veil of ignorance. More, it can free us from the causal nexus, not a small thing. As Herbert Read put it: 'There is a chain of cause and effect in our practical life, in our intercourse with the external world: but deep within man's subjectivity there is an effect which has no discernible cause, which is a process of discovery, of self-realisation, a rending of the numinous veil of consciousness.' The rending of the numinous veil will not lead to anarchy, for which Herbert Read had a bias. On the contrary, as Sri Aurobindo has shown, this will mean a higher harmony of self-determination. To use his words: 'As we rise in the scale of being we find that the power of conscious self-determination increases more and more. Those who live most powerfully in themselves can also most powerfully use the world and all its materials for the self and, it must be added, most successfully help the world and enrich it out of their being. It is one of the greatest secrets of old Indian spiritual knowledge.'

Harmony, said Tagore, is the mother tongue of the soul. The advent of the true poet would mean a Second Coming, the Risen Man, what David Gascoyne describes as the Revolution of Poetry, the Revolution of Christ. Who knows how many encounters with the heart of darkness this will involve? It is a challenge to all of us who claim to live civilised lives. We are at home nowhere. Orpheus is at home here as in the other worlds. For the majority, J'ai perdu mon Eurydice, I have lost my Eurydice, marks the loss and the longing. The plea for poetry as reality-revealer, as healing, as an intimation of Immortality, is not a plea for the past tense, but for a lost wisdom, lost in course of modern enlightenment. David Holbrook has dubbed it as the lost bearings. Who can deny the nuances of nostalgia on the contemporary scene, as of devils weeping over Paradise Lost? But how were the bearings lost? A brief look at the history of modern thought will help. Since the Galilean-Newtonian-Descartesian Revolution, man in the western hemisphere has to live in the world without the subjective and immaterial aspects of cultured living, in the secular abyss. To resist
further desecration we must opt for a whole vision of human nature and destiny, redefine not only poetry but civilisation. Only so can poetry cease to be a 'mug's game,' the half-humorous phrase Eliot had used at Harvard.

As we have seen, poetry, a function of our creative being, locates itself in the evolving self of man. Our one and only duty must be to ourselves, to free creativity. It is an energy-field where mysteries more than Eleusinian revive. Mallarmé wanted poetry to purify the language of the tribe. We are in the presence of a power that purifies the consciousness of the tribe. Not aesthetics but alchemy.

Auden once said, a trifle casually, 'To the imagination the sacred is self-evident.' An adulteress in a story by Camus realises late that she is going to die 'without being set free'. In India of old, not to have known Brahman, while alive, was compared to living death. It has its echo in Kabir who said: 'If He is not found now, He will not be found then, and we shall go to Hell in the City of Death.'

In a sense poetry is but a dialogue with death. From death we may move, if we or our poets will, to acquire the 'crown of conscious Immortality'. As an American poet Kenneth Fearing tells us, at journey's end the question returns: 'Is this, baby, what you were born to feel, and do, and be?' All men have a feeling of something above them. Poetry is one of life's ways of reaching out, moving from one plane to the other. To be or not to be, and what to be, is a question poetry alone can answer without ceasing to be poetry. This does not mean a readymade answer, some sort of 'solving the universe'. It is more likely to be an encounter with authentic Existence in the vale of soul-making. The birth of the psyche is the most important event in our history of which the historian knows so little and cares even less.

Logos, 'the imagination of God', is more than logic. Its final gift is an enactment of the original Mystery, of an archetypal Sacrifice. He must travel Hell the world to save. 'Each man,' said Hölderlin, 'Has his Mystery.' Only so can poetry recover and retrieve its lost fortune and become the leader of the human evolution. It is the great aerial bridge between our earthhood and heavenhood. Here is a little known gnostic text. The speaker is Christ, whose martyrdom was self-chosen, decreed from above:

Thou hearest that I suffered but I suffered not.
Understand the riddle:
The transfiguration of the Logos, the Blood of the Logos,  
The suffering of the Logos, impaling of the Logos,  
The wound of the Logos, the hanging of the Logos,  
The death of the Logos.

Through death to a greater birth, through awareness and sacrifice to self-renewal, the road is as open now as always. If man is a possibility, poetry is the promise. Through an act of conscious sacrifice — since conscious is better than unconscious — if we had the knowledge that we have not, poetry offers a foretaste of Paradise here and now. To be human in this sense is perhaps our last heroism. Else we shall be but refugees from reality. The resonance of the All will pass us by. From determinism to self-determination is man’s ascent to truth, the truth of his nature and being, the search for the self, an immemorial quest. Our thesis is not that poetry is liberation but liberation is poetry.

The faculty of the possible, the graph of our evolution, cannot but make liberation an inevitable, ultimate concern. From Buddhism to the Beatniks, from Advaita to the Absurdists, from Christianity to Communism, freedom has been the major human motive and value. The form and content vary. The truth is one, the wise, and not so wise, speak with many voices.

Wisdom-bloom on the summits of being, liberation cannot be a uniform formula. It has to be earned anew, on one’s own. As many Lamas as there are peaks, the Real towards which our strivings move. The release of visionary powers is our sore need. Is the atman the answer to the threats from the atom? Thanks to the strange necessity to know oneself, poetry shows us the face of the person behind the mask or masks, the hidden self that lives within us by ourselves unseen.

Can there be a better justification for poetry than that, ‘spelt against death’, it is a praise of the Logos and therefore free? In Auden’s words:

\[
\text{In the deserts of the heart}  
\text{Let the healing fountains start;}  
\text{In the prison of his days}  
\text{Teach the free man how to praise.}
\]

Or has freedom ceased to matter? Is suicide the fate of homo sapiens?
The constant and dynamic mystery of our experience is the interchange between certainty and uncertainty. That is between the expected and unexpected: the security of the known and the delight and shock of the unknown. Our ‘experience’ is centralized in the basis of unity, wholeness, advaita, yet our experiences are dualistic, dynamic, the very diastole and systole of our perceptual nourishment. When the unknown or unfamiliar, those experiences that have the least reference to our inner understanding, invade beyond a certain point then the resultant duality can erode our balance of mind or wholeness. On the other hand when we no longer see anything as ‘really new’ we can suspect that it is not so much our ‘control over the world’ but that our ‘dark glasses’ of prejudice and preconditioning are blocking vision from reaching our inner understanding.

The art that nourishes, uplifts, inspires and sustains the spirit is the art that touches the heart of our inner understanding. The intake of breath from surprise as the new breaks the veil of a dulled vision, the holding of the breath in a moment or two of wonderment, and the exhalation of relief when the understanding of the artist reaches the inner understanding of the receiver are marks of this realization. The unique has revealed the universal. The part has reached its whole again – yet without losing its uniqueness. Is this what is meant by recognition?

We all know the disasters of an art based on a conflict of convention on the one hand and deliberate shock and forced uniqueness for its own sake on the other. The shocking soon fails to shock but forces a desensitization to that which it believed it was attacking. On the other hand the unexperienced of the conventional tends to reinforce an increasingly partial view eventually deteriorating into the empty forms of sleep-inducing comfort of the totally expected. This, however, has nothing to do with the sacred canons of the Arts that exist in all
traditions; canons which specify structure for the flights of inspiration, improvisation and uniqueness of the moment. One only need bring to mind the Indian rāg canons, the underlying geometry of Egyptian art, or the musical modes, in particular those of the Gregorian chants. In the realm of the most beautiful calligraphy strict rules and unique qualities co-define and co-support each other in all cultures. 'The spirit bloweth where it listeth', yet it needs to become a human structure to reach human consciousness in particular forms of inspiration as well as accuracy.

There is no quicker way to have to face the unexpected than to be given the task of speaking on a subject that one has neglected, yet is central to all the great artistic traditions: the subject of Angels.¹ Research revealed that Angels in one form or another figure in every genuine human tradition, from traditions which name the ultimate principle to those which warn against attempting to describe the indescribable. The first task was to find relevant terms already existing in one's vocabulary. The word that came to mind most readily was 'intelligence', not intellect which is more to do with human response, but rather the 'degrees' of understanding that William Blake (following Swedenborg) called 'states' through which human understanding 'passes'

In the Holy Qu'ran there is a passage that says, 'They will ask you concerning the Spirit (of inspiration)', which more or less translates, 'We say the Spirit is by command of the Lord, of knowledge only a little is given to you (O man).² Reminding us of the Socratic approach to wisdom; i.e. the beginning of wisdom is what we do not know. Understanding is possible between people when there is both the spirit and the vehicles of communication. This will always be a mystery as we can never know exactly what our fellow person is feeling, knowing, or their state of understanding – in the same way that we cannot 'prove' that we all see the same yellow of a flower. However, when it comes to the deeper 'more important' things beyond proving on the material level, direct inner inspirational truths do seem transferable, in a sort of silent confirmation of a feeling or a glance – or within great works of art.

¹ The immediate reaction is to search for a personal redefinition, or fall into the easy rejection based on conventional Victorian graveyard imagery.
² Sura XVII, 85. The Holy Qu'ran.
Language, whether in number, shape, sound or light, is one of the ladders of convention apparently both necessary and safe for the conveyance of understanding and therefore intelligence for the human family.

Angelic intelligences, as we will choose to call them, are generally characterized as mediators between ourselves and God, (or if one wishes to stay outside the tradition of naming the ultimate principle) between ourselves and wholeness. They are described as ‘guides’, or messengers on our ‘return journey’ to our own wholeness, and as they are not approachable through the mechanical behaviour of the material aspect of our experience, they have become neglected in a modern world. ‘Gravity’ or ‘change’ are permanently intelligible, yet we only experience either when they are enacted in things and through things. We know of ‘principle’ through intelligence; through action we experience confirmation. Action without intelligent principle is ‘mindless’ and tends to be chaotic, yet even chaos is itself the principle of least order and cosmic passivity.

Language is structured on elements, as our experience of materiality is. Elements or parts are the co-necessary relationships of wholenesses or unities. The alphabets, as vehicles of intelligence, appear to have an inextricable connection with ‘the Gods’ who brought them to humanity as well as to the Angels, as the inner psychological and spiritual permanent realities of the human condition. We might say that we communicate to ourselves through ‘knowing our own mind’.

Having cited ‘the’ alphabets, let us see if there could be a connection between, say, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Arabic as vehicles of Revelation. Firstly the answer might appear obvious and negative, they all have a different number of basic letters in their alphabets. A clue to the answer, however, may come from a remarkable little volume which is a precis of a work of the ‘teacher of teachers’ – Ibn Arabi. Here the master set out the multiple levels of symbolism of the sacred alphabet, of the Holy Qu’ran as it was revealed to him.¹ This is a very deep subject and requires intensive and careful study yet we can summarize an important feature. The letters of the Arabic alphabet are 28 in number and have a particular correspondence to the phases of the moon.

According to this special insight the correspondence between the nearest heavenly light, the moon, its numerical permanent rhythm and human consciousness are hereby related. Put another way this greatest of the Islamic philosophers states that the 'heavenly lights' have an inner and precise relation to intelligence in both the human and in the cosmic or transhuman sense. Is this an isolated instance or is it really the clue to other traditional correspondences?

In the Vedic tradition according to the Saundarya Lahari, there is also a direct correlation between the Sàmskrit alphabet and the cosmic geometry of the Shri Yantra.

This is also a deep and important study that requires a teacher and guide to take one across the boundary of curiosity into genuine study, yet one can find implications similar to the symbolic correspondence indications of Ibn Arabi.

The ultimate geometric representation of the cosmos in the Vedic tradition is called the Shri Yantra.

The Shri Yantra (see illustration 1) is a deeply complex subject yet it is presented as a singular whole visual image. It is the ultimate chakra or 'cosmic wheel' and associated with a summarization of the bodily chakra system which is said (in the Vedic traditions) to connect the gross and subtle bodies. Conventionally each chakra holds a number of the 'letters' of the Sàmskrit alphabet.

The Great Divine Mother, as the Vedic tradition calls the immutable or unchanging form of Sabda Brahman, continuously functions throughout all universes through her emanations. In 'our' world she becomes the little mother Matrikas in the form of alphabets. The letters of the alphabet are known as Aksaras and they share in the immutability of the Sabda-Brahman. It is in this way that the alphabets are considered the repositories of all the divine names or Mantras. The dynamism of the Sàmskrit alphabet is based on the division of sixteen vowels being Shakti or of feminine power, whilst the letters beginning with ka and ending in Ks are a form of Shiva or of masculine power. The 'marriage' of articulated language is the joint use of both. The Shri Chakra, as it represents in another form the same union of Shiva and Shakti is also called the Matrika chakra or alphabet wheel. It is known as the abode of all sound formations – the circle of little mothers. In the ancient Tamil language the letters are known as ezhuthu or those who have woken up; the vowels are called uyir or 'life' and the consonants mey or 'body'. 
The letters of Devanāgarī have their heads covered as do Bhaktas of many Sampradāyas in India during worship—Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Sikh. The line on top of the letters could also be seen as representing the seal and blessing of divinity, a completeness of realization. Indeed the script and scripture of Samskrta (Sanskrit) are heavenly in their aesthetics and phonetics, philosophy and poetry.' Ramchandra Ghandi. (pp 94 'I am Thou')

Like a pebble dropped into a still pool, one way of viewing the Sri Chakra or Sri Yantra is to see it as a God’s eye view of the Bodily form making principles in number geometry sound and thus cosmogony. As the most profound and comprehensive of the sacred geometric forms of esoteric vedic wisdom it is not the subject of ‘explanation’ rather an unlimited symbol of the principles of limit.

Nothing can be more simple than the fact of unity. Yet nothing seems more evident than the experience of diversity and variety. Yet the fact of unity makes possible knowledge of diversity and variety otherwise each experience would
There are differing schools of Vedic wisdom that teach the distribution of the letters and sacred mantras in appropriately different ways specifically we are told, to avoid the dangers of empty lifeless ritual.

Recent research by O. M. Hinze\(^1\) has also demonstrated the cosmic reflexion of the correspondence between the seven chakras of the system of the subtle body and the planetary archetypes; thus pointing to the cosmological symbolism of universe as sound and pattern. This has been called ‘The Garland of Letters’, in the famous work of Arthur Avalon, which has an interesting parallel in the Greek meaning of the word Kosmos which means ‘adornment’.

Again a connection with angelic intelligence is clearly discernible in the explanation of Sri Aurobindo, who says of the Nine Masters represented by nine constituent Chakras of the Sri Chakra that they ‘... are at once the divine seers who assist in the Cosmic and human workings of the Gods and their earthly representatives, the ancient fathers who found the wisdom of which the Vedic hymns are a chant and memory and renewal in experience ...’\(^2\)

The Sanskrit alphabet, when placed spirally and accurately on the Sri Chakra is said to be one of the most powerful invocations of wholeness as a protective influence.

The 22 intervals or consonances that the Semitic alphabets are invariably based on is a marvel as well as the most powerful influence on the written languages that have emerged from the Hebrew of the Torah, the Greek of the Christian Gospels and the Arabic of the Holy Qu’ran. Each inheritance comes from the 22 interval phoenician alphabet. The latter two however, expanded to 24 and 28 intervals respectively as they adopted symbols for the vowels (see illustration 2).

The Arabic of the Holy Qu’ran, is believed to have come into its final form between the 4th and 5th centuries AD. (There is a trilingual inscription in Greek–Syriac–Arabic of AD 512 at Zabad near Aleppo.)

\(^1\) O. M. Hinze: *Tantra Vidya*; Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1979.

\(^2\) Sri Aurobindo, ‘On the Veda’.
The 22 letters are based on the ancient Semitic alphabet of 22 plus six new consonants placed at the end of the sequence according to 'numerical order' that is number value per letter, which correspond sound, script and number.

These extra six were necessary to distinguish in written form the finer shades of the very subtle sounds of the Southern Semitic spoken language. The refinement, or one might say overwhelming beautification of the written forms that is the history and evolution of the Arabic scripts was a direct contemplative celebration by the faithful of Islam of the word of God in the form of the Holy Book. The esoteric interpretation of the alphabet we have referred to by the Master Ibn Arabi gives further insight into the working of the Universal Intellect from the Islamic perspective.

The story of the Greek alphabet has its similarities — and no doubt its many untold subtleties — the earliest examples were written from right to left like the Semitic scripts, later to be superceded by the boustrophedon direction, 'as the ox draws the plough'. After 500 BC the writing in Greece invariably proceeded from left to right and from top to bottom. Certain adaptations were made for the Greek sounds from the Semitic and certain non-Semitic sounds were given to letters such as ph, ps, kh and x.

Some of the subtleties of the philosophers' speculations about the nature of sounds and letters have come down to us or been reconstructed by careful scholarship. Frank and Koller made their reconstruction of what they believed was a Pythagorean teaching on the parallel between Harmony or Music and Language. This they did from the writings of Adrastos of Aphrodisias in Caria in the 2nd Century AD. This can be best set out as follows:

```
Language  | Music or Harmony
Sounds    | Sounds
Syllables| Intervals
nouns     | harmonies or scales
verbs     |
```

Pythagorically, the principle of 'number in time' would underly both. Another interesting source is Kratylos, a disciple of the Great
An extended correspondence of the alphabets that are believed to be generated from the ancient Phoenician which is seen nearest the centre. The centre itself is a representation of the ‘retrograde loops’ of Mercury. Outside the Phoenician there follows in sequence the Greek from the ninth to the sixth centuries BC. Beyond this the Aramaic alphabet at the time of Jesus. After this the ‘classical’ Hebrew and on the outer circle the Greek of Plato and the Christian gospels.
Herakleitos and teacher of Plato who distinguished between sounds (stoicheia) and letters (grammata) and the names of letters (alpha etc.), between vowels (phoreenta) and consonants (aphona) and mutes (aphtonga). He also developed an onomatopoetic theory, attributing to each sound an idea. For example R to ‘motion’, to I ‘subtleness’, to PH, PS, S and Z ‘blowing’, and to D and T ‘binding’ and ‘rest’.

The Greeks like the Romans, attributed the introduction of new letters to Semi-Divine Beings such as Prometheus, Orpheus and so on; even King Cadmus who is said to have brought into use the first 16-lettered alphabet in 1313 BC. However, we can say that generally, the order of the Greek letters corresponds with a few understandable exceptions to the order of the Semitic letters (see illustration 3). The numerical values were most important, as this is the way the Greeks wrote their calculations and was the basis of the Science of correspondences known as gematria.

Now to return to our theme: (a) structured language as a vehicle for objective intellectual exchange, (b) the Semi-Divine origin of the Gift of Language and numbers and therefore the (c) ‘Angelic’ nature of a vehicle for mediating between the universal intellect and the Human intellect: or one might say between the Whole and the Part, the Unified and the Unique.

In classical mythology Mercury or Hermes is the ‘messenger’ of the gods, in a similar way that ‘Angelic’ intelligences are the messengers of God in Christianity. Mercury is also the ‘fastest’ of the planets that circumscribes the earth (after the moon), (from our geocentric and empirical) viewpoint and makes a characteristic series of three ‘Loops’ in toward us each year.¹ This looping Plato insisted must be considered choreography of the Gods as should all the patterned movements of the heavenly lights we call the ‘wanderers’ as they are mediators of divine intention.

Hermes was also the ‘God’ who brought the gift of language, he is called Theuth (Thoth) by Socrates in his amusing little anecdotal story in the Phaedrus (274d –275ab.).

Mercury the ‘messenger’ or ‘teacher’ is one of the set of Heavenly lights that communicates through rhythm and number in time to the human eye and mind. Careful observation reveals that although this

¹ These loops are a fact of experience and observation known currently as retrograde movements.
Robert Fludd’s schema here shows the 22 stages of unfolding of the created order from the Godhead signified by Deus. From the first intellect the orders of angels the stellar and planetary spheres are followed by the elements of ‘our’ world. This demonstrates both a simultaneous as well as an emanational schema of the created order in true Kabbalistic tradition. The 22 stages or envelopes are each represented by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
'wanderer' makes three loops toward us and away per year, it takes 22 such loops or pauses in the circle of the Zodiacal constellations before returning to the same position again. Thus Mercury divides the full circle of our ecliptic environment, our whole sky, exactly 22 times in one complete cycle, before covering the same area again (see illustration 4).  

Is this to be taken as chance? Or is it one of the 'intelligent' messages that Plato recommended we turn to when the circulations in our own

Illustration 4

Numbers inside are the sequence of occurrence of the retrograde loops of Mercury against the 'permanent' constellations of the circle of the sky. This is the earliest Phoenician alphabet of consonances.

1 Thus 7 1/3 years at three loops per year touching on another ancient formula for π or 22/7.
soul were out of sorts.\footnote{Timaeus.} Here is a reminder once again of a planetary fact that corresponds to one of the most powerful and enduring conventions of the intervals of sound we call the alphabets.

How many philosophically-minded readers of Plato have been inspired (to precision) by the remark in the Epinomis: ‘to the man who pursues his studies in the proper way, all geometric constructions, all systems of number, all duly constituted melodic progressions, the single ordered scheme of all celestial revolutions, should disclose themselves . . . on their single end.’\footnote{This author’s italics.} As such a man reflects, he will receive the revelation of a single bond of natural interconnection between all these problems. . . . And piety itself forbids us to disregard the Gods, now that the glad news of them all has been duly revealed.’ (Epinomis 991d – 992b).

At this point in this all too brief look at the connection between Words, Letters, Angels and the Planetary ‘Gods’, I would like to return to the inner language of number and symmetry as it is. It informs, enforms and discloses the ‘genuine’ in the domain of the imaginal. I will analyse three small but deeply significant contemporary poems; two by Wendell Berry from West Virginia and one by Kathleen Raine.

Both Wendell Berry’s poems are songs of return to a momentary singularity, a oneness. The first through a simple but beautiful structure that folds up the world of cycles from eight lines to six lines to four lines to two and finally the inexpressible mystery of the ‘darkness’ of union. Each time taking away duality.

The second summarizes both the power and necessity of structure (Law), the descent into rest through the elements and the equal necessity to sing the existence you find yourself entering – the chorus of social harmony, ‘the only outlawry is division.’ It is the song (the music of the spheres) we forgot to forget that will ‘find’ us. ‘Meet us in the air’ sing the ‘Angellic’ swallows and the Redbird (the Phoenix) closes the four worlds into one, ‘here here here here.’

Kathleen Raine’s poem ‘The World’ is in my view one of the most powerful affirmations of the ‘eternal’ cosmology in contemporary poetry – in value far outstripping the deviations of popular so-called cosmologies such as Carl Sagan and the mechanical empiricists of our sad dualistic conflict-torn times. The seven ‘its’ are pure advaita.
Within the circles of our lives
we dance the circles of the years,
the circles of the seasons
within the circles of the years.
The cycles of the moon
within the circles of the seasons,
the circles of our reasons
within the circles of the moon.

Again, again we come and go,
changed, changing. Hands
join, unjoin in love and fear.
Grief and Joy. The circles turn,
each giving into each, into all.
Only music keeps us here,
each by all the others held.
In the hold of hands and eyes
we turn in pairs, that joining
joining each to all again.

And then we turn aside, alone,
out of the Sunlight gone
into the darker circles of return.

Both poems are from 'The Wheel' (San Francisco, 1982)
The Law That Marries All Things

1. The cloud is free only to go with the wind.
   The rain is free only in falling.
   The water is free only in its gathering together,
   in its downward courses in its rising into air.

2. In the Law is rest if you love the Law, if you enter, singing into it as water in its descent.

3. Or Song is truest Law and you must enter singing: it has no other entrance.
   It is the great chorus of parts. The only outlawry is in division.

4. Whatever is singing is found, awaiting the return of whatever is lost.

5. Meet us in the air over the water sing the Swallows.
   Meet me. Meet me the redbird sings here here here here.
It burns in the void.  \( \)  
Nothing upholds it.  \( \)  
Still it travels.  \( \)  

**THE WORLD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gravity</th>
<th>Word Plan</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Letters</th>
</tr>
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<td>( (1) = 46 \times ) 16</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>( (3) = 48 \times ) 16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{Sum of Words} = 40 \]

**KATHLEENRAINE**

The sixteen letters used in the poem.

**ABCD**EFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
44 88 884 16 104 8152088

**SIXTEEN** is a double Octave (Letters)

Eight, the octave, occurs eight times.

**TEN** is the return to Unity or perfection.

It occurs seven times.

Four is the number of the World.

Three is the number of harmony.

There are four verses of three lines each.

\[ 0 = 10 \quad S = 13 \]

Ten is the tetradktyos: Thirteen is the center of twelve.

\[ S \text{ is the } 19^{\text{th}} \text{ letter in our alphabet.} \]
Commentary from the Western Tradition of Theological Number

The poem flows from a negative formation of six qualities arranged in three lines which sum to a dissipative, purposeless endurance of eleven words – 11 the number of transgression and ‘beyond the measure’ of the perfect 10. The second verse arranges the same six qualities so that they sum to the opposite implication of teeming life, direction and purpose; the words sum to nine, the triple trinity, the ‘all but perfect’. The third verse also rearranges the six qualities to give a second sceptical and negative implication; burning away in emptiness it remains inconsequential: again the negative ‘transgression’ of 11. Finally the six qualities rearranged back into an affirmatory sequence which implies an ultimate contemplative state and not needing to ‘go’ anywhere, suspended in stillness, a passional void – samhadi – an inevitable embracing unity. The spiritual fruits of the trinity of trinities. The balance of the two ‘negatives’ 11 + 11 and the two ‘positives’ 9 + 9 sum to the ‘worldly perfection’ of the number four reinforced or multiplied by the completion number ten i.e. 40, or the days of the wilderness.

The affirmation is like a koan or the familiar Islamic invocation: ‘No God but God’; dual speculation is silenced by the advaita of the ‘isness’ of the inevitable perfection of the imperfect – the world is. Advaita or non-duality is. All else is magnificent illusion.
The death of my mother, it
Doesn't mean she's gone for ever,
It means she has crossed over;
I cry because I have tears, and there seems to be
A joy in the air (she liked
To call herself Joy, it was her
Dancing name, Joy Gordon, thus,
When she danced she was my Father's Joy;
His name was Gordon.)

What are ghosts? The medium said
Whenever you think of her,
Greet that image kindly, say
'I'm glad to see you' it will give
The spirit Joy; to be fluxile
Like air, but
Constant as metal,
Not keeping to the one world,
Seeking unity with the living:
I see her now, she dances,
I am very glad to see you dancing,
Joy.

I see spirits, and try
To greet them kindly; and there is never
A company of the living
Without its spirits mingling:
There they were
Doing their Tai Chi
Under the dawn trees, the living
In their loose linen jackets and white ghost-trousers
A ballet of clowns moving as the trees move
To the dawn wind and the dawn chorus,
And among them, spirits,
Like air coiling, as though
Certain enhancing lenses had swept
In front of trees
Or between the dancers;
Under the dawn trees collecting
All the natural forces that do us good,
Gathering the metals of the trees
In manual alchemy, in sequent poses
Adopting the shapes of the vessels
Of human distillation, the hushed
Receptacles, and without, within,
The condensation of a magical dew;
To gather Joy.

The fair-haired one in the long skirt
A portion of the gnosis
Dancing slowly under the dawn trees,
She was the first one there, she was dancing
When I arrived, slowly under the dawn trees
To catch their bright metal, the distillation vessel
Itself dancing.

Just so might my daughter
Call herself Zoe Peters
For dancing or other joys
And signify 'Peter's Life':

I went to fetch her
From a friend's birthday party
In the long upper room of the Church Hall;
Some eleven-year old lingerers were murdering
'Happy Birthday' on the old piano by the little platform;
There was a memento of iced cake in a twist of polythene
To take home, and there had been dancing;

There was still dancing.
The room was full of dancing, no girls were dancing,
There was dancing up to the ceiling, the air still paced
With Joy and I looked up and greeted them kindly.
Childstone

I can hear better when I am naked,
Hear better and see better, the whole skin
An eyeskin, a hearing-drum.
The candle-flames swayed lightly, without breaking,
A magical balancing-act. She held up
The pierced pebble against the flame,
The light licked in its hole, it’s called
A Hagstone, she said, but it’s a childstone,
I hear her, I see into the stone,
Into its secrets, she held her hand up
Against the flame, I saw her bones through it,
Her child stones, she looks at me
Through the sockets of a stone, I
Look back thinking of the Virgin portrayed
By candlelight inhaling the holy ghost
Of the open lily to procure the mystical
Insufflation, and nude as she quickens.
She dances nude, and quickens. Spirit children
Trail in the whirlwinds of her scarves,
Who is the next in line? of whom
All fleshly children are abstracts
Presiding from the holed stone in her hand
Which the light pierces, to compile
The total child, baby and woman,
With an infinite wish
To carry everything up into itself, and mark
Whatever it passes by, as the spirit
Of air and water rushes out of the blowhole
On the point, all the waves starched in line
Up to the horizon. This stone is shore
To all the candlelight, seen and unseen
As she holds up the ocean
Of children, in that pause, that dream-pause,
A scented house-goddess manifest
Shewing a perfumed childstone with a hole in it
From which the spirit-children peep
On the lookout for women to quicken, nice and fat,
On the day of creation, called the day
Of ‘Come Thou To Me’, crying silently
From the lodestones, which are full of them
Since of all stones it knows direction.
This dark pebble laid on the polished table
Spins, until it rests, its hole dark
And full with direction, for
It is a type of pneuma, signifying
That the spirit is enduring
And even the visitation of a child
May last almost for ever.

Wooden Pipes

The hands in the womb,
The invisible hands serving at the feast,
The round banquet in the high domed hall,
Shaping the child and serving her,
Combing her body to the right shape;
This is going on now.

I believed I heard Zoe
Playing on wooden pipes as plain as plain
But as I woke fully
It was a seagull crying.

There is an inner, and an outer daughter.
My sleep makes me as my waking does,
The sleep of invisible hands
Of servitors, the music of wooden pipes,
The tree-song shortened for human ears,
The blessed ghosts of that feast
And the drunken guest at it, the reveller
Who wakes in the cold air
To the music of seagulls.

There is an inward, and an outer daughter,
And the outer girl sits, combing her hair,
The mother watching, takes the comb
Soothes her head, gliding out of it
Aches of the day with her visible hands,

For with invisible hands the same woman
Below and within is combing
Another daughter into shape
Among the birth-currents
A womb of full tresses

And the outer daughter speaks to the inner
Through the mother,
The inner daughter speaks through the mother’s actions,
The two sisters are combing each other’s hair,
The mother is the interface,
The two daughters kiss her.

Das Knaben-Mädchen

The scholar’s
Overlapping collar,
A beach of littoral
Between ebbing and flowing
Body and mind;
The neck, where the two seas touch.
A beach on which a flowing tie
Advances towards the face
Bright as a pebble with concentration,
Like the conching of a tide;
A beach on which
A limp bow has been washed up;

The wave of linen rising
Over the jacket collar and stilled
In concentration. She sits
Like a vulnerable child
Studying, yet has also to adopt
Bush manners: tigers
Stride through these books.
So she pulls off the tie
And opens her collar
Like one approaching the hot jungle;

There rises from her body
The fume of the metals
Smelted by her excitement,
She smells tiger
And therefore she smells of tiger;
And this distillation

Rewinds into its own lungs,
By retort, and redistils
In fractionation of the brass breath
Of tigers as she turns pages,
Knife at the ready
To slit uncut leaves
Like the bellies of real but paper tigers;

Or unsealing temple hiding-places
White as the cloth of altars
With the alphabet disposed about its cloth
Like twenty-six sacramental utensils:
Cups, wands, knives and whirling discs.
Presuppositions of the Sacred in Life and in Art

PHILIP SHERRARD

The word 'sacred' is one of a whole group of cognate words – words like sacrament, sacrilege, sacrosanct, consecrate, sacrifice – the original meaning of this last, sacrifice, being precisely to 'make sacred' (sacra facere). Its root, then, is Latin, not Greek: 'sacer', still present in our sacerdotal, of or belonging to a priest; and it denotes something set apart, devoted to a deity, a holy offering. In early Christian language it was applied, in its synonymous form, sacramentum, to any action or object which as 'mirror' or vehicle or form of the Divine was regarded as revealing the Divine. We are at once in the midst of things. The sacred is something in which the Divine is present or which is charged with divine energies. This is to say that the very idea of the sacred presupposes to start with the presence of the Divine or the existence of God. Without the Divine – without God – there can be no holiness, nothing sacred. You cannot talk about the sacred without presupposing the Divine, just as you cannot talk about sunlight without presupposing the sun, however many mirrors it may be reflected in.

Moreover, God is not only the principle – the original cause – of all making sacred – of all sacrifice. He alone is sacred. At one of the most solemn moments in the divine liturgy of the Orthodox Church the priest raises the consecrated bread before the congregation and cries: 'Holy things to those who are holy'; whereupon the congregation responds: 'Only One is holy, only One is Lord, Christ in the glory of God the Father.' The presence of God – the presence of the Divine – is, that is to say, the initial and ultimately unique presupposition of the sacred, for the simple reason that without that presence there is no sacredness anywhere. This means that if, for instance, earth, nature, life, art, or anything else is sacred, this is because it is the expression or revelation of something infinitely more than itself, something which it but discloses or manifests. It is not because it is sacred in its own right, apart from this Other that it enshrines, still less because we make it sacred. The first symptom of the profane mind – of the idolatrous mind
— is its habit of separating its ideas of things — its ideas of earth, nature, life, art, or anything else — from the idea of God; because as soon as you do begin to separate these ideas from the idea of God you have set out on the path that leads to the desacralization, the desecration and ultimately to the destruction of the things themselves.

If, then, something in the physical or psychological realm — the realm in which we experience the greater part of what we do experience — is sacred, this is because the Divine — that which is wholly Other — has irrupted into or ingressed upon it. The sacred, that is to say, in so far as we experience it, presupposes — and this is its second presupposition — the irruption of that which is wholly Other upon the physical or psychological realm. This introduces a theme crucial to the understanding of the sacred: the theme of the transcendent.

'Transcendent' is a word which has many different shades of meaning. For the purpose of this paper — though without giving any finality to this usage — I use it to denote that which lies beyond the psychological and physical realm, beyond soul and senses, beyond the psychophysical. It is synonymous with the Divine and the uncreated, just as the psychophysical realm is synonymous with the created and with the world of nature; and throughout this paper I use the three terms — the transcendent, the Divine, the uncreated — as equivalent to each other, just as I use the three terms — the psychophysical realm, the created, nature — as equivalent to each other.

I think that here I should point out one of the consequences of what I have just been saying about the transcendent that is pertinent to my theme.

From the point of view from which I am now speaking, to talk about wholeness, or the holistic approach to things, without including within one's perspective that which lies beyond the psychological and physical realm is to put the cart before the horse. For just as there can be nothing sacred without God, because ultimately God alone is sacred, so there can be no wholeness without God, because ultimately God alone is whole. It is the Divine that is the principle — the source — of wholeness, and without participation in the Divine there can be no escaping disintegration, fragmentation, self-alienation, however much we may struggle against them. In Greek the words which correspond to the English words save, salvation, Saviour, contain the sense both of soundness and of wholeness. To be saved is to attain a state in which
one is sound and whole, entire; and the Saviour is He who bestows these qualities — who integrates, makes whole, keeps alive and well — because they are qualities that belong to Him and to no-one and to nothing else. That is why when we lose contact with the Divine — or when we ignore the transcendent — we not only cut ourselves off from the source of sacredness but also, and as a consequence, fall into a state of disintegration, sickness, self-division.

Indeed, it is this losing contact with the Divine, the source of holiness and wholeness, that is the crux of the fall of man; and our modern age exemplifies it as perhaps no other age ever has, because it is the product of a state of mind which has lost the sense not only of this fall but also and correspondingly of practically every aspect of the sacred. We all look for the origins of the deviation of human thought of which the reductio ad absurdum is the desecrated wilderness of the modern world, and I myself tend to see, if not the cause of it, at least a decisive symptom of it in the famous doctrine of the ‘double truth’ proposed in the Middle Ages by the scholastic philosophers. According to this doctrine there is a double order in things, a double order of knowledge, or two levels on which things are viewable. There is a supernatural order or level, and there is a natural order or level (nature now being understood as a purely physical reality). The supernatural order is the state in which grace is paramount, and it corresponds to the sphere of theology. But where nature is concerned, no considerations of grace or divine intervention are necessary, because nature follows its own inherent laws which have nothing to do with grace or divine intervention. This means that nature — the natural as such — is now accorded a status of its own, to all intents and purposes independent of the Divine. Of course, by the scholastic philosophers God is still regarded as the author of nature, but essentially nature works according to its own laws, and it is quite sufficient to take account only of these laws in order to discover how nature does work.

Moreover, it is now assumed that these laws can be investigated and defined by the human reason quite apart from whether or not this reason is itself illumined by divine grace or inspiration. In other words, in order to discover the laws of nature — in order to gain a knowledge of nature — neither divine grace nor divine illumination is necessary. Such a view of things at once gives a charter to the unregenerate and profane human mind to study and investigate nature as though there was
nothing divine in it or about it at all, and even more disastrously it gives assurance to such a mind that the knowledge it obtains as the result of its observation and investigation is a valid and authentic sort of knowledge. This charter and this assurance are the prerequisites and mainsprings of the modern scientific mentality, which actually demands that we regard the physical world, man and practically everything else as impersonal objects, deprived of all divine qualities and possessing nothing sacred about them at all. A mentality such as this builds a world in its own image: our own mechanized, industrialized, dehumanized and desacralized world, in which man’s separation from God not only alienates him from himself but also separates the visible universe from man and makes both of them wanderers, lost travellers cast out into the deserts of time and space.

At this point it may be protested that I am exposing myself to something like a contradiction. I have said that the initial presupposition of the sacred is the reality of God and of a divine realm lying beyond the psychological and physical realm, while the second presupposition is the irruption of this transcendent divine reality — the wholly Other — into the psychological and physical realm. But if this is the case, what is wrong, it may be asked, with the scholastic distinction between two orders of things — the supernatural order and the natural order — which I claim has had such disastrous consequences for both man and nature and has finally led to the virtual obliteration of our sense of the sacred altogether? Am I not affirming precisely the same kind of distinction when I speak of a divine realm that transcends the psychological and physical realm, even though it may irrupt into the latter? And in that case, what is wrong in studying and investigating the natural order, and man along with it, as though they were objects obedient to their own laws which are quite other than the laws — if there are any — which operate in the transcendent order? What is wrong in separating the idea of nature from the idea of God? Why can’t there be theology on the one hand, and science on the other?

This introduces us to the third presupposition of the sacred: the presupposition not of God’s transcendence to nature, but of the mutual immanence — the mutual indwellingness — of God and nature, the interpenetration of the uncreated and the created. ‘Theology’ is a word which has become somewhat debased coinage in our age. For us it tends to mean something abstract, something that goes on in
universities or among congeries of bishops: we call it 'God-talk' or something equally disparaging. Yet actually it denotes far more than learning and discourse about God and religious doctrine acquired through academic study. 'In the beginning was the Word.' So opens the authorized English version of St John's gospel. But what is translated into English here as Word is the Greek word Logos, and logos in Greek means far more than Word does in English. Logos betokens the underlying reality of things, that which they are, or that which is, before their appearance, or that of which their appearance is the manifestation. And St John's gospel goes on, in the same sentence, 'and the logos was God'—kai theos in o logos. 'Theology'—from these two words, God and Logos—is to do therefore with the underlying divine reality of things and personal participation in it. If I speak of nature as theological I mean precisely this—that its underlying reality is divine and that it participates in this divinity. If I speak of man's existence as theological I mean the same thing. In this sense 'theological' means more even than 'theophanic', which is the showing forth of God, the showing forth of the divine; it means the actual symbiosis—living together—of the uncreated and the created, the Divine and the human, God and nature.

We are here in a sphere of understanding in which the scholastic distinction between the two orders or levels of existence, the one supernatural and the other natural, has no place. We have gone beyond such a dualistic view of things, in which the otherness of God is projected in the otherness of the physical or material nature of the visible world, so that there is always a distance between them, a hiatus which culminates in an absence—in a deus absconditus—and makes it impossible to conceive of a nuptial union between them. Here, on the contrary, we are affirming precisely such a union. Not only man but every created thing bears a hidden poetic logos—a divine logos or divine essence—its interior word, at one with its concrete appearance, in such a way that there is an intimate interpenetration, a secret coincidence between them. By mutual assimilation Creator and created, the visible form and the divine idea informing it, grow together to the point at which each becomes the other's mine: the two become one. It is as in the sacrament of marriage in which the beloved otherness of the two partners itself constitutes the matter or ground of the sacrament: finis amoris ut duo unam fiant.

It is a union which, although it overcomes division, does not involve
confusion. In creating what is created, it is Himself that God creates, in another form. In creation, He becomes His own symbol: the image is also epiphany. To symbolic realism corresponds epiphanic realism. The created image, that is to say, far from being merely the image that suggests or points to an intelligible reality, actually contains and expresses this reality. It does not merely signify; it is what it signifies. A tree, for instance, is an intelligible reality that thinks itself in the form of a tree. Creation is a revelation not simply of a truth about God; it is the revelation of God Himself: 'The heavens declare the glory of God', 'heaven and earth are full of Thy glory'. The created world is God's sacrifice of Himself in His creatures: it is the means whereby He is what He is. Were there no creation, then God would be other than He is; and if creation were not sacramental, then God would not be its creator and there would be nothing sacramental or sacred anywhere. If God is not present in a grain of sand He is not present in heaven either.

What is in question is a relationship that one might describe as a dialectic of the unity of opposites - a unity in the duality of Spirit and matter, God and nature, that unites them in a manner that goes beyond all monism just as radically as it goes beyond the dualist two principles of explanation or the viewing of God as a kind of object. The miracle is that the divine Otherness becomes for me more interior than my own soul. In this way God, far from being an object, is known and experienced as the absolute subject of my own being. Through His epiphany or incarnation my ego or selfhood is displaced and is replaced by this absolute subject who is God. This means that, paradoxical as it may sound, it is ultimately myself, in so far as God has become the absolute subject of my being, that reveals God to me, free from all spurious objectivity. At the same time - and this is another aspect of the same paradox - the divine subject is in fact always the active subject of all knowledge of God. This is why to worship God's gifts in other people is the same thing as to worship God Himself.

If, then, divine transcendence is one presupposition of the sacred, so equally is immanence in the Divine. There is no dichotomy between God and creation, no dualism, no double order of things which makes it legitimate to study the world of phenomena as though it were to all intents and purposes independent of the Divine. To study the world of phenomena in this way is only possible when in our minds we have already denaturalized nature. Nature - the psychophysical realm - can
be understood only when we recognise the reciprocal immanence of God and man, the uncreated and the created universe. In other words, the world of phenomena is also the theophanic world, the world in which God shows Himself forth. In no way is it an illusion: it is fully real, because it is precisely the other self of the Absolute. Short of realizing this, one will always remain outside the precinct of the temple, outside the temenos. So long as one thinks that there is on the one hand a subject, an ‘I’ isolated in its egoness and set over against the world of phenomena, and on the other hand an object, God, a divine Being isolated and abstracted in its unknowability, there cannot be any access to the sacred, whether in life or in art.

Transcendence and immanence are thus correlative, not contradictory terms. Without transcendence there is no immanence, but equally without immanence there is no transcendence. And they do not make a double reality, or multiply reality into two. Each of the elements of the partnership – God and man, the Divine and nature – is, or represents, not simply the same reality, but that reality in its fullness. Each is, or represents, both the whole and the same whole. And it is their vital conjunction, their dynamic interpenetration, which gives birth to the sacred and makes the whole visible universe theological, the matter of a sacrament, a single icon of God, a holocaust of divine love and beauty.

If this is the reality of things, how is it that we so abysmally fail to perceive it as such and to experience it as such? How is it that we have built around ourselves a world that witnesses to the desecration of this reality at every point and at every moment – a desecration that we perpetrate without even realizing that we are desecrating anything or that there is anything to desecrate? The temple-robbers of old at least were aware that they were robbing temples; we have lost even the sense that there is a temple to rob, a temple to profane, and this gives us an impunity to commit our crimes, our day’s work of slaughter and pillage, methodically, without passion, as one might prune or operate, and with no sense of guilt. We have stripped inner and outer landscape bare of all those emblems of sanctity, those recollections of sanctity, which once nourished the soul – the shrines of saints, the retreats of hermits and holy men, their sanctuaries of worship and prayer, the festivals of song and dance in which they were celebrated. And even if sometimes we borrow their ideas to spice a discourse, to give an air of sophistication to our art or scholarship, it is much in the manner of
Heliogabulus who ate the brains of ostriches, and not at all with the sense that it is their lives that we should be emulating. Indeed, far from emulating their lives we continue to cut the cloth of our mind and body not in order to be worthy of the kingdom of heaven but in order to fit more comfortably into our comfortless and uprooted world.

And if we ask — and to our credit we are beginning to ask it more and more — in the name of what have we reduced ourselves to such caricatures, to such parodies of our true stature, inflicting the same distortion on to everything about us, we will find in the end that it is in the name of that mentality, with its pitiful complement of basic concepts, which is still committed to perpetuating this state of affairs; which still persuades us that we have the right, if not the duty, to invade and ransack the physical world at any and every point — to split atoms, dissect living animals, rape the sky, experiment with gene and foetus, and in laboratories, power-stations and factories to prepare those fruits — and by their fruits you shall know them — whose brutal inhumanity testifies only too well to the infernal source from which they derive. In other words, we will find that we have despoiled our inheritance in the name of a so-called science that exists and can exist only through the appalling negation of all wisdom and true philosophy, the elimination of the person as of every other sacred reality, and a criminal indifference as to whether or not God is active in human and other life and human and other life are active in God.

Meanwhile we are all actors out of work, with no part to play. We have even forgotten that we have a part to play, let alone how to play it — this part in a sacred drama which alone can confer meaning and beauty on our lives. More, we have forgotten that there is a sacred drama and that unless we do play our part in it we disrupt the harmony not only of our own lives but also of the life of everything about us.

Because that interplay of the uncreated and the created, the invisible and the visible, the transcendent and the immanent, which constitutes the sacred, presupposes the participation of man just as much as it presupposes the activity of the Divine. This is a further presupposition of the sacred. Man's role is crucial in the actualization of the sacred not so much because he is a vital link in the chain of Being that extends from higher to lower down the whole scale of creation, as because he is a microtheos — a lesser God — in a microcosm. This is to say that man is not simply one created being, however exalted, among other created
beings. He is not simply the microcosm in whom all that exists in the physical world is subsumed and summed up, in such a way that one can affirm that the physical world is simply the human soul writ large. He is also himself the macrocosm, the measure of all things, and the physical world is his creation just as God is his principle. This means that we perceive the physical world correctly ('not with but thro' the eye') when we know it as the living, richly varied but scattered 'portions of Man's immortal body'. It is when we forget this and think of God as our judge and nature as our mother that we go astray.

It is this status of man in relation to the physical world that makes his participation in the process of 'making sacred' – his participation in the sacrificial rite – as much a presupposition of its fulfilment as the activity of God. For although the physical world is so impregnated by divine energies that everything bears within it its own creative logos or essence, its hidden seed of divinity, this seed of divinity cannot come to fruition – cannot be brought from a state of potentiality to a state of actualization and revelation – without human cooperation. It is not that things – what we call material realities – are objects in the sense presupposed by modern science, still less that they exist only in so far as they are perceived by the human mind. But they remain in bondage, atrophied, stagnant, frustrated unless they are animated by human sympathy and love. They attain their meaning, come to fruition and are fulfilled in human perception. It is through man as the knowing subject that they are felt, imagined and sanctified. It is in and through us that the physical world is hallowed and that its intrinsic sacramental quality is revealed. It is we who are the priests of the temple of this world. For if this world is a mode of discourse between man and God, or the revelation of God to man, giving the measure of the transcendent Unity in the variety of all things, yet at the same time man is the organ through which – or through whom – God unveils to this world its own mysteries.

Yet we can only ourselves fulfil our priest-like task on condition that our own inner world is animated by God. That perception through which we can hallow things is not ours, or at least it is ours only in so far as we can go out of ourselves, not towards the physical world, but towards God. It is only when we can contemplate in ourselves the Wisdom of God, the beauty of the poetic essences of the universe, and in their light recognise their counterparts or equivalents hidden beneath the outward appearance of things, that we can reveal to these
things their eternal being and bring this being to fruition. For like responds only to like: so that unless our own perception of things is itself charged with the knowledge and love that have their source in the Divine, the latent seeds of divinity in what we perceive will not find in us anything to respond to, and so will remain latent, in bondage, stagnant and frustrated, and we will have failed in our priestly role and will have profaned not hallowed the temple in which this making sacred—this holy sacrifice—is our responsibility. It is on us that creation depends. It is in our life that creation lives. This is what St Paul has in mind when he speaks of all creation groaning and travelling in pain, living in the hope of deliverance from the bondage of corruption and waiting expectantly for the revelation of the sons of God—waiting, that is to say, for man to transform it into a cosmic temple of adoration and praise.

It should now be clear why we so fail to realize and to experience the reality of things as they are, if only they were allowed to be what they are: it is because we fail to recognise and acknowledge, at least in effective existential terms, the bond that units God and man, God and creation, and because for all our claims to the contrary we do not in fact act as though everything is, or can be, sacred. We divorce our ideas of things—our ideas of nature, life, art, knowledge whether scientific or other—from the idea of God. We do not contemplate in ourselves the forms of divine Wisdom, those spiritual forms which in essence are visible only to the eyes of the heart and in whose light alone we can perceive the holiness of things. For how we perceive things, or reveal them to ourselves, depends ultimately on the vision we have of our own inner being; and if that vision does not embrace the spiritual qualities, of beauty, of love, that fill our being when we attune ourselves to the Divine, we cannot perceive these qualities in the forms of the things about us—we cannot perceive their intrinsic sacredness. The link between transcendence and immanence is broken. The intimate interpenetration, the secret coincidence of uncreated and created, divine archetype and visible image, is frustrated, and the marriage between them remains in a state of suspension.

Indeed, it may often be, and in our world certainly is, far worse than this. For the more we fail to attune ourselves to the Divine, the more we begin to live according to the illusion that our own self is sufficient to itself in order to be itself. The more we fail to assimilate the forms of
eternal Wisdom, the more we confine ourselves to the sphere of the psychological and the aesthetic. And the more we confine ourselves to the sphere of the psychological and the aesthetic, the more we become, knowingly or in a state of delusion, victims of our limited intelligence, our hallucinatory imagination, our unstable emotions, our own purely individual and subjective reactions to what we perceive or come into contact with. The deep-seated amorality of the human being, his internal chaos, is now unleashed by the irresistible and seductive power of the aesthetic impulses of the soul; and the images that they project into the imagination, far from having anything sacred about them, represent more and more an ontological perversion, a lack of coincidence between divine archetype and visible form, a dissolution of the bond uniting the divine and the human, the uncreated and the created, and an eclipse of inner content. These images are no longer symbols, for a symbol unites the visible and the invisible, the terrestrial and the celestial, while these images but testify to the sundering of these two aspects of reality—their sundering, that is to say, in human consciousness—and to a throwing apart of things (and one should remember that in Greek the word symbol and the word devil have the same root, but that the one denotes a bringing together while the other denotes a throwing apart). And when such images inform and animate man's perception of and relationship with the physical world, or inform and animate his art, they produce not a revelation of the intrinsic sacredness of things, but a dislocation, a distortion that vilifies the very idea that life and art are or can be—let alone should be—a bringing to birth of the beautiful and the holy.

Art is in fact a sphere in which discrimination between the sacred and the profane, the sanctifying and the degrading, is particularly difficult and where confusion is all too likely to occur. Assuredly, the presuppositions of the sacred of which I have already spoken apply also where a sacred quality in a work of art is concerned. But when talking about the first of these presuppositions—namely, that all sacredness has its source in God—I said that man himself cannot make something sacred: he can participate in the making sacred, but he cannot be the active agent. The active agent must always be the Divine, so much so that in one sense man—the 'I' or 'ego'—does nothing. Yet by virtue of the fact that man is created in the image of God, he is also a creator, a maker, an artist. Indeed, this is his distinguishing role, that which is capable of
making him holy. 'I will sing to my God so long as I live', says the psalmist; and it is this celebration of the Divine, of His perfections and His beauty that constitutes our chief glory. As Dylan Thomas wrote in a note to his *Collected Poems*, 'These poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God'; and he added: 'and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.' A 'damn' fool certainly, if he wished his poetry to have anything more than an aesthetic appeal. As the young Gogol put it: 'If Art does not accomplish the miracle of transforming the soul of the spectator, it is but a transient passion . . .'.

Yet to transform something, whether human soul or any other created reality, is to restore or reveal its true nature to it; and since to do this is to bring it from darkness into light, and this light is the divine Logos – 'I am the light of the world' – it is also and simultaneously to initiate it into the truth, goodness and beauty of its own being; for truth, goodness and beauty constitute the ultimate trinity of divine qualities. They are the distinguishing marks of the sacred. At the supreme summit of things, in the ultimate synthesis, the true and the good, in their symbiosis – their mutual interaction – give birth to beauty, are the source of beauty. 'Beauty is the splendour of the true,' as Plato put it. Yet at the same time it is an enigmatic quality. It is an enigmatic quality because if the truth is always beautiful, the beautiful is not always true. Its initial unity with truth and goodness can be disrupted. 'Beauty will save the world,' said Dostoievsky, but he adds immediately afterwards: 'What beauty?' For, he says, 'The heart finds beauty even in shame, in the ideal of Sodom, which is that of the immense majority. It is the battle of the devil and God, and the human heart is the field of battle.' Plotinus is even more explicit: evil, he writes, 'is as though bound in beautiful fetters, as some prisoners are in chains of gold, and hidden by them, so that though it exists it may not be seen by the gods, and men may be able not always to look at evil, but even when they do look at it, may be accompanied by images of beauty . . .' It is not only God who can 'clothe Himself in beauty', evil can as well. The devil can transform himself into an angel of light. Indeed, is not beauty linked to the original fall of the most glorious of the angels? 'Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy beauty.' (Ezekiel 29:17). Beauty placed beyond good and evil usurps the place of the Absolute, with total indifference towards truth and
goodness; and it converts the human soul to its idolatrous cult. 'Alas, through the will of the devil who aspires to destroy the harmony of the universe, beauty has been thrown with terrible derisive laughter into an atrocious gulf,' wrote the sadder and wiser Gogol, as he also wrote: 'Better for you (Beauty) not to exist at all, to stay away from the world.'

This double-edged nature of beauty — reflected in the double-edged nature of art, whose most immediate and compelling touchstone is beauty — is due to the fact that though it is a divine quality it is also the supreme aesthetic value. It is its aesthetic value, not its divine quality, that the scholastics stress when they describe beauty as id quod visum placet, that which pleases when one sees it. For pleasure is symptomatic of aesthetic experience, of things sensibly perceived by means of artistic forms. The soul is not evil: it is by nature pure and immortal. But its vision can be obscured and vitiated; its imagination — the human imagination — can lose its contact with the divine imagination, to such an extent indeed that, as is only too clear from much contemporary music, forms and images which in themselves are sacred can be used in a manner that, far from nourishing, actively debases the mind and heart of those who come under their influence. And when the soul's vision and imagination are vitiated in this way, the soul's outlets on to the world of phenomena — the human senses — are also vitiated. 'Ears and eyes are bad witnesses for those with barbarian souls,' said Herakleitos. When reduced to such an unnatural state the soul and the senses are incapable of perceiving or grasping the underlying reality of things, their sacred dimension or their hidden poetic essences, and these essences will always escape them. Consequently what the soul perceives when in this state it seeks to enter into communion with the world of phenomena will be not these phenomena in their own intrinsic identity, but simply reflections of itself projected into them, echoes of itself received back from them. It will as it were simply be disporting itself in its own waters, engaged in endless intercourse with itself; and the images engendered through this intercourse, androgynous and narcissistic, may well possess beauty, but this beauty will be but aesthetic or psychic, not sacred or spiritual.

It is because of this that if soul and senses are to perceive the spiritual beauty of things, their sacred dimension, an ascetic operation is required: a purification, a cleansing not so much of the gates of perception as of the soul itself. This could be said to constitute another
— the sixth — presupposition of the sacred, or of the actualization of the sacred. It is not that by means of this ascetic operation we have to suppress the senses, or that we have to replace them with another and new receptive organ. It is that they have to be restored to their natural state if through them we are to perceive what is beyond the senses, beyond the aesthetic as it is also beyond the psychic. And a precondition of this is that the soul itself has first to be restored to its natural state, to its original purity; and this means that the soul has to free itself from extraneous influences, from those images unleashed into it by its own aesthetic impulses, so that it may once more become receptive to the divine light and to the forms of eternal Wisdom which it communicates. For it is only in this light that it can penetrate beyond the aesthetic experience of things and perceive their innermost reality, their sacredness. Only the spiritual can perceive the spiritual. And when the soul is restored in this way — made whole and sacred — and its imagination is regenerated, then the senses too are spiritualized, just as what they perceive is spiritualized: that which participates in the light itself becomes light.

The asceticism, thus, of which I am speaking is not an asceticism which opposes the Divine to the human, the supernatural to the natural. It is not a matter of transferring attention from a created ‘object’ to a divine ‘object’. It is a matter of the metamorphosis or transformation of one’s own subjective being. For only when such a transformation has been achieved in us are we in a position to distinguish between spiritual beauty and its aesthetic simulation, between the beauty that saves and the beauty that enslaves, because only then can we attune ourselves to and actively participate in the transforming beauty of the divine truth itself; only then can we see the beauty which is a transcendent quality of being, a quality of the divine light in which all things are made. Divine beauty, like this divine light, is neither material, nor sensible, nor of the imagination, nor intellectual; but it gives itself in itself or by means of the forms of this world and can be perceived equally well through the senses as through the intelligence and the imagination.

This is not a naturalistic mystique, nor a gross materialization of the spiritual. It is the vision, lived and experienced, of the communion of created nature in the uncreated reality of the Divine. It is in sanctity, in the Spirit, that man recovers the immediate intuition of true beauty.
Salvation through beauty – the transfiguring of things through beauty – is not an autonomous principle of art. It is a religious affirmation. The beauty that saves – the beauty that consecrates the world and frees it from demonic possession – is a divine beauty, a quality totally rejected by the activities of the secular world and most of what passes for its art. For access to this beauty – the interior beauty, bearer of the sacred message – is barred by the angel with the flaming sword. The way to it is opened only by a birth in the Spirit – a rebirth – which is the death of art and its resurrection, its birth in an epiphanic art, an icon: in a recognition that true beauty resides not in nature as a self-subsistent reality but in the epiphany of the transcendent of which nature is the cosmic radiation, the cosmic manifestation and incarnation. The artist can achieve his true vocation – make his art a sacred art – only in a sacerdotal art, in accomplishing a theophanic sacrament, in bringing about what is to come: ‘Behold, I make all things new.’

It is here that contemplation – not aesthetic but religious – reveals itself, in life as in art, as the loving of every created reality: a love, an ‘ontological tenderness’, that raises what is created above itself and liberates it from its bondage, its isolation, and even from death itself. Only in and through love is the ultimate innermost reality of things disclosed and fulfilled. Such love is not a divine quality, still less is it a personal attribute, something merely human and emotional. It is the is-ness of all divine qualities, their very essence. Apart from love there is no reason for the existence of the world – ‘God so loved the world’ – and apart from love the world has no purpose in existing, all other purposes being either auxiliary or merely false and superfluous. It is the ultimate irreducible touchstone; it is the seal and the consummation of the sacred.
Towards the end of her book *The Need for Roots* Simone Weil observes of modern civilisation that 'it is sick. It is sick because it doesn't know exactly what place to give to physical labour and to those engaged in physical labour.' This may seem at first hearing a somewhat unusual way to characterise the sense of malaise and alienation that so many feel is present in daily life today. But remember the phrase 'physical labour'. It is physical labour — merely quantified human effort, unrelieved by any qualitative satisfaction to transform it — that to Simone Weil is the essence of our sickness. She goes on: 'Physical labour is a daily death. To labour is to place one's own being, body and soul, in the circuit of inert matter, turn it into an intermediary between one state and another of a fragment of matter, make of it an instrument. The labourer turns his body and soul into an appendix of the tool which he handles. The movements of the body and the concentration of the mind are a function of the requirements of the tool, which itself is adapted to the matter being worked upon.'

Finally, she ends her book with the following two sentences: 'It is not difficult to define the place that physical labour should occupy in a well ordered social life. It should be its spiritual core.' In an age such as ours which has sought every opportunity by means of the machine to banish any form of physical labour from our working lives this seems an audacious claim. But at least we can agree that work, even after a century and a half of widespread mechanisation, is something we are not yet free from; that it concerns all but a very few of us, and that, perhaps, it is or should be necessary to our well being. Perhaps we can even agree that life is ultimately destructive without work and that, conversely, work is destructive of life if it is meaningless. Meaningless work and soulless work are surely one and the same thing and if work is imposed upon our lives so as to be meaningless (and here we must include all questions of economic necessity), it is felt as a burden that is contrary to our inmost nature. And yet work is man's very signature. By
his fruits we might know a man. So the question we have to ask is not what does a man get for his work so much as what does he get by working? For work is a being as well as a doing.

For this reason I shall not consider the economic or social consequences of work, for all such considerations are somewhat circular in their inconsequence. That is to say any explanation of work based upon economic or social factors alone cannot avoid the circular philosophy whereby we work in order to live, that we may live in order to work. If we want an ultimately satisfactory answer to the question, what is the nature of work? we must understand what it is we get by working. So, as I hope to show, these observations of Simone Weil strike at the very heart of all that is unnatural, inhuman and artificial in our society.

To speak of there being a 'spiritual core' in work is not only to invoke a spiritual image of man, but it is also to hint at the subtle thread that joins the Sacred to whatever demands are made upon man in order that he sustain his physical existence. It is to presuppose, in some way or other, that the spiritual forms the hidden context of man's life, that man is made in the image of God and for God, and that the one is not fully real without the other. If this is so we have to go on to ask the further question of how could it ever come about that, in order to sustain his earthly existence, man should be obliged to follow a course of action that is a direct denial of the Sacred, as if by some ghastly mistake by the Almighty it is man's destiny to follow a direction that leads him away from the very thing it is his nature to be. If we are to avoid such an unthinkable dilemma, we must conclude that in some way work is or should be profoundly natural and not something that must be avoided or banished as being beneath our dignity. We have seen in recent years too much of the indignity of the workless to believe that. It should be clear then that we are here concerned to enquire whether and, if so, in what ways and under what conditions work possesses what might be called a contemplative dimension. Obviously not just any kind of human effort is conducive of the sort of states of mind that lead us back to our original nature, our inborn spiritual essence, before it is distracted or distorted away from itself by the demands of the ego, by the desire for economic well-being, for prestige, for comfort, and the like.

The very title of this conference, 'Art and the Renewal of the Sacred', indicates that we are here to consider the possibilities, in whatever way,
of a regeneration of our present situation. It is not a question of providing pontifical answers so much as a need to focus more sharply on the terms by which such a regeneration may take place. That is why we should guard against the temptation to claim for the arts the status of a sort of substitute religion that can somehow be manipulated so as to deliver us from our current malaise. Is it not obvious, it might be said, that art, however we define it, simply reflects what sort of society and what sort of people have called it into being? This view of art is, I believe, mistaken and comes about as a result of a confusion to which I now turn.

One of the most pernicious ideas that prevents us from realising the intimate relationship that should exist between work and our spiritual nature is the idea that art and work are and must be separate categories of activity. This is, to say the least, to fly in the face of our common-sense observation. It cannot be said that the work of the workman, that is the work of utility, that it is necessarily non-beautiful in contrast to the work of the artist. Nor can it be said of art — that is to say, work of refined sensibility — that it serves no human need. If we admit that man is a spiritual being then it is clear that he has needs and requirements beyond and in addition to his bodily needs. It is also clear that he should not, as it were, divide himself so as to serve his spiritual needs with one sort of activity and his physical needs with another; since the work of utility rightly done may result in a type of beauty that is informed by a refinement of sensibility just as art inevitably involves some form of making and utility such as is characteristic of work when it is properly human work. And in our society, it must be noted, most work does not involve making in any real sense. Both art and work, then, should be modes of making and being and it is man who is and does. Just as there is no art without some work, so there should be no work without some art. Thus all who are actively involved in work should be in some sense artists just as all artists are workmen, to the extent at least that each seeks to achieve some mastery over his material, to effect its transformation, and to the extent that such transformation properly accomplished will involve mastery over oneself. If we are to be in some sense ‘saved’ from the kind of divisive thinking already hinted at then we surely have to realise that a state of affairs in which our houses, the fixtures and fittings in them, our everyday utensils, our clothes and all the things we use and which make daily life function at all, are poorly
made (or at least made with the minimum of any human agency) while we have a few 'art' objects to serve to 'transform' our life is a profoundly unnatural and immoral state of affairs. And will a visit to a gallery of modern art be sufficient to compensate for the meaninglessness such an inhuman, tawdry, humdrum existence implied in such a division of our nature? Can we accept such a state of affairs as normal?

In thinking about any possible regeneration through the arts we should not only remember that to accept a division between art and work is to falsify the human image, but we should also remember that it is with man himself, with his metaphysical and spiritual nature, that any reform must begin, since it is by the measure of his inner, essential nature that man is greater than his products. As Philo said: 'Even a witless infant knows that the craftsman is superior to the product of his craft both in time, since he is older than what he makes and in a sense its father, and in value, since the efficient element is held in higher esteem than the passive effect.' (The Decalogue, 69, Colson's translation). In reminding ourselves of the anteriority of man himself in relation to his work we also catch a pre-echo, as it were, of the relationship between the human context of work and the archetypal nature it mirrors. As Plotinus wrote: 'All that comes to be, work of nature or of craft, some wisdom has made: everywhere a wisdom presides at a making.' (Enneads v.8.5 MacKenna's translation). Let us look at what is involved in such a wisdom.

Once we have recovered the idea that there is no artificial division or barrier between art and work we are better able to consider the ways in which man should be linked by his spiritual nature to the work of his livelihood. For if the sacred is not in some way present in things at hand it is unlikely to be present at all. The sacred is not something that exists only to function in an exclusive category of our thoughts and actions, as in prayer or going to church. The numinous, sacred essence of things is nearer to us than is our jugular vein - to borrow a phrase from the Koran. How can this be? Let us examine some of the words we habitually use when we discuss the relation of work to life. Wisdom often works in words like sap in plants.

It is still just possible to speak of the workman as having a trade, or as following a vocation. Note the word 'following' as well as 'trade'. The etymology of the word trade is uncertain but its root is possibly tread.
What we tread is a path – a walk towards some goal. A trade, then, as Walter Shewring recently reminded us (Artist and Tradesman p. 24), is a form of work or craft, an occupation conceived as a walk in life. From this we can see that the idea of a manual trade inherently contains the sense of a vocation and as such presents the possibility of some form of realisation, by way of conforming a set of external possibilities to an inner imperative – an inner voice. A vocation is, of course, a calling, and functions by virtue of an inner summons (and, incidentally, raises the question of who is summoned by whom). The etymology of the word work implies the expenditure of energy on something well or finely made – especially made with skill. As such it points towards a kind of perfection of attainment in the human artificer. So, hidden in the word work we come again upon the idea of realising or attaining something above or beyond the mere expenditure of physical energy. Moreover, this attainment implies not only the rejection of certain possibilities and the adoption of others, it also implies an inherent wisdom to make the choice that will permit the effective realisation of whatever is to be attained. Now, since strictly speaking there is no perfection in the created order of things this perfection towards which skill inclines must belong to another order, a supra-natural order of things, towards which man is called.

The abstract Greek noun techne gives us, in its Latin equivalent art, meaning, in one of its general senses, a way of being. From the Latin art we derive our word art. The Indo-European root of art means to fit together. Techne has the same root as the word carpenter (in Old English a skilled worker is especially one who works in wood). The Carpenter is one who fits things together. Techne means a visible skill in craftsmanship. But in Homer it is used in the sense of something in the mind of the artist – what later comes to be called imagination. And this sense of art as being a mental predisposition that stays in the artist was deeply embedded in our language until the seventeenth century, when it began to be applied to a select category of things made. So, permeating all the meanings that accrue to the language of work and art we have the sense of one who fits things together: possibly fits the domain of manual necessity to the order of a higher imperative. Certainly the symbolism and the mythology of the various sacred traditions as they are connected with the arts and crafts indicates that such is the case.

In stressing that we might usefully recover the idea of art as an inner
disposition of the person who makes things, rather than apply the word art to an exclusive category of aesthetic objects, I do not mean to suggest that there is no difference between say, the art of cathedral building and the art of the potter. That is not the point: which is that in all cases of human making (and who would care to decide which was the most important art between say cathedral building, motherhood and agriculture), human making is a wisdom, an art is involved, and in so far as this involves the expenditure of effort, both mental and physical, it is a sacrifice — and one of the meanings of sacrifice is ‘making holy’, to perform a sacred ceremony.

The primordial meaning of human work, then, is to be found in the fact that it is not only a skill about doing, but that it also embraces a supra-human wisdom about being. In other words the work of doing has a contemplative foundation in the stasis of our being. When we turn to the sacred traditions, whose works are even now an everlasting source of wonder for their beauty and skill, we find that the workman or craftsman or artist does not receive his vocation from the material circumstances of his life but that his calling is from the highest source. (The Latin homo for man, incidentally, is closely linked with humus — of the earth — from which we derive our words humble and humility. This has vital ecological implications with regard to the crafts, as we shall see.)

In the Indian tradition the source and origin of the craftsman’s calling is derived ultimately from the divine skill of Visvakarma and is revealed by him. The name for any art is ‘silpa’, a word that is not adequately translated by our words ‘artist’, or ‘artisan’, or ‘craftsman’ since it refers to an act of making and doing that has magical powers. In the context of the Indian tradition works of art imitate divine forms and the craftsman recapitulates the cosmogonic act of creation as the artefact recapitulates the rhythms of its divine source. By his action of making, and in conjunction with his practice of yoga, the craftsman as it were reconstitutes himself, and thereby goes beyond the level of his limited human personality.

In the craft tradition of Islam certain pre-Islamic prototypes were preserved and came to be connected with parables in the Koran and with certain sayings of the Prophet. Speaking of his ascent to heaven the Prophet described an immense dome resting on four pillars on which were written the four parts of the Koranic formula — In the name — of
God – the Compassionate – the Merciful. As Titus Burkhart has pointed out, this parable represents the spiritual model of every building with a dome. (Sacred Art of East and West, p. 112). The mosque in Islam is the symbol par excellence of the Divine Unity, the presiding principle of Islam itself. The mosque thus acts as the centre towards which the arts and crafts of Islam are oriented by virtue of its involving so many of them. From the construction of the mosque the crafts, as it were, flow, since architecture, along with calligraphy, is the supreme art of the Islamic revelation.

In Islam the crafts were organised around guilds which were themselves closely connected with Sufism, the esoteric dimension of the Islamic faith. Similarly, the guilds of medieval Christendom employed a symbolism and a knowledge of a cosmological and hermetic nature. The symbolism of the crafts in the Christian tradition take as their starting point the person of the Christ who was himself a carpenter. (The Christ of the trades appears as a carving on many an English Parish Church.) It may be that the highest sacred art of Christianity is the icon – the divine image. But alongside this is the craft tradition, pre-Christian in origin, and which is above all cosmological in its symbolism beginning with physical space as the symbol of spiritual space and the figure of Christ as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the timeless centre whose cross rules the entire cosmos.

This is not the time and place to go into the extensive symbolism that is inherently a part of the arts and crafts – which incidentally, is another way of saying the livelihood – of past civilisations. A glance at any dictionary of symbolism will suffice to demonstrate the ubiquitous presence of symbolism in the physical artifacts of people’s lives. It is sufficient to note here that all crafts and trades, from ploughing to weaving, carpentry to masonry, metal work to poetry and music, were interwoven with their transcendent principle and by virtue of this were capable of an internal transposition. Here there is no ‘art for art’s sake’, but in each case there is the possibility of the vocation acting as a support for contemplation; a means for the worker to rise to possibilities above and beyond his habitual, acquired personality.

Although, according to Genesis, work is occasioned as a result of original sin, nonetheless, for the Christian there is always the exemplar of God ‘who made the world and saw that it was good’. Against this there is, as it were, the counterpoint of a recognition that His Kingdom
is not of this world, so that man, who has some remembrance of the
divine paradise of his origin, retains the possibility in his work of
travelling the path back to God for 'there is no faith without works'.
(James 2.26) Between these two perspectives the earthly destiny of man
takes place. What proceeds from the divine principle is good; the
archetype of perfection is the unmanifest reality of the divine principle:
'Every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the father of
lights'. (James 1.17)

In all human endeavour the archetype of perfection is a prior
knowledge or wisdom in which there seems to be mirrored the infinity
of possibilities. 'For the invisible things of him from the creation of the
world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,
even his eternal power and Godhead?' (Romans, 1.20). The vision of
the divine prototype as a wisdom inherent in the actual tools of trade is
beautifully evoked in Exodus (Book 25), where after describing in
some detail the making of a sanctuary, Moses is urged that it be done,
'According to all I shew thee, after the pattern of the Tabernacle, and the
pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it.' But on
this infinity of possibilities, it is the burden of work to place a limitation,
for all endeavour involves choice and selection according to a
pre-existent image. If this were not so work would be for the sake of
work and there would be no distinction of means and end. Work
would be sufficient unto itself, which is another way of saying that we
would be slaves to the idea of worshipping work rather as there is
enslavement to the worship of art in our society. But as Aquinas points
out, 'As God who made all things did not rest in those things . . . but
rested in himself from the created works . . . so we too should learn not
to regard the works as the goal, but to rest from the works in God
himself, in whom our felicity lies.' (Com. on Sentences 2d, 15, 3, 3).

Work – proper work – is the imposition of order on matter, thus
matter is transformed by human intention and will. The true workman
does not work merely to perfect his materials according to their own
nature but according to an inner order that is his nature. In a very direct
sense, then, the worker must be free to be the very thing he makes. As
Eckhart says, 'The work that is “with”, “outside”, and “above”, the artist
must become the work that is “in” him, taking form within him, in
other words, to the end that he may produce a work of art in
accordance with the verse “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee”
(Luke 1,35), that is, so that the "above" may become "in".' (Clark and Skinner, p. 251). It follows that if the artist or the workman is to achieve perfection in his making he must let nothing come between his conception of what is to be done and its execution. And this conformity of his being to the final realisation of the work is the primordial model of human workmanship. It implies that work is, in essence, as Eric Gill said, for the sake of contemplation, just as much as it implies that the perfection of work is achieved only at the expense of self-consciousness. As the Japanese potter Hamada said: 'You have to work when you are not aware of self.' So in work perfectly realised there is no thought of reward, no love of procedure, no seeking after good, no clinging to goals, whether of attainment or of god himself.

We might recall at this point that for Plato it was a type of justice that each man should do what it is in his nature to do. And Eckhart, in a sermon on justice, gives a further clue as to the inter-relationship of our work and our being, how, essentially, our work is to be and our being is our work.

The just man does not seek for anything with his works, for those who seek something with their works are servants and hirelings, or those who work for a Why or a Wherefore. Therefore, if you would be conformed and transformed into justice do not aim at anything with your works and intend nothing in your mind in time or in eternity, neither reward nor blessedness, neither this nor that; for such works are all really dead. Indeed I say that if you make God your aim, whatever works you do for this reason are all dead and you will spoil good works . . . Therefore, if you want . . . your works to live, you must be dead to all things and you must have become nothing. It is characteristic of the creatures that they make something out of something, but it is characteristic of God that He makes something out of nothing. Therefore, if God is to make anything in you or with you, you must beforehand have become nothing. Therefore go into your own ground and work there, and the works that you work there will all be living. (Clark and Skinner, 1958, pp. 53-4)

It is possible to expand and annotate this passage from Eckhart with a passage from Plotinus in which he says: 'All that has self-consciousness and self-intellection is derivative; it observes itself in order by that activity, to become master of its Being: and if it study itself this can mean
only that ignorance inheres in it and that it is of its own nature lacking and to be made perfect by intellection. All thinking and knowing must, here, be eliminated: the addition introduces deprivation and deficiency.’ (Enneads p. 254). Plotinus is here confirming the paradoxical principle of all human thought and action whereby we cannot really know anything until we know everything, we cannot properly make anything until we attain to the perfection of all works.

There can be no doubt that our acting upon a material substance is conditioned by that substance and proceeds through our senses. But at the heart of the act the senses are not involved and there is an immediate and unconditioned intuition in the soul of the timeless wellsprings of action: something that is not part of the act of making as the dead centre of a hub does not take part in the rotation of the wheel. And no degree of perfection in work is attained that does not touch upon this stasis of Perfection itself. That is the spiritual function of skill. No perfection is embodied in that which is unprepared, for like is known by like, and skill in the execution of work is first of all a skill residing in the workman. The skilled maker intuitively knows that the perfection of his work rests upon his own being and is not determined by external circumstances. It is his own insufficiency that may prevent the perfect realisation of his task. And it is just this interior conditioning or state of being that the crafts, with their tools as an extension of the physical body, maintain and which the machine destroys. The tool nurtures the integral relationship that lies at the heart of all work; the total freedom of potentiality in physical effort corresponding with the necessary determination inherent in perfectly realised workmanship. Such is the 'spiritual core' of work. The reality of this integral relationship can be grasped less abstractly from this passage from H. J. Massingham. In 1938 Massingham recorded his impressions at watching a craftsman who was making a traditional Cotswold, five-barred gate or 'hurdle'. He wrote: ‘The intrinsic contact with his material must and does humanize him and unseal the flow of the spirits. He seemed to be talking to his wood as well as to me, and sometimes he forgot I was there . . . It would be meaningless to say that such a man as Howells loved his work: he lived in it!’ (Shepherds Country, pp. 61-2).

I mentioned a moment ago that the word *homo* (man) is connected with *humus* and hinted that this has important ecological implications. Man is quite literally ‘of the soil’, his life is sustained hourly and daily by
what the soil provides. All traditional cultures have been sustained by the crafts. And not only in virtue of their symbolism, but also by virtue of their being intimately rooted in a specific geographic place and locked into, as it were, a specific set of material and ecological circumstances that provide the material occasion and substance of the means of livelihood, the crafts conserve the natural environment. This is so because the crafts are in turn tool based. The tool is a conservative instrument of manufacture precisely because of its intimate relationship with the perfection of skill, as we have seen. Skill is to some extent cumulative. It is born of circumstances that are relatively stable and it flourishes in the context of tried and tested ways of doing things. We can only measure skill against a given set of conventional procedures and a pre-determined end. We cannot determine whether a totally new procedure is skillful since the novelty of the method required for its accomplishment will be outside any convention and will be uniquely determined by the occasion. The worker cannot, as it were, test himself against a set of circumstances that are unknown to him. It is for this reason that the constant search for novelty and innovation in work demoralizes the worker, as indeed it has demoralized the artist in our time. Constant innovation eventually alienates the worker from both the procedures and the materials of his work.

For this profound reason the crafts tend not to elaborate the means of production beyond and away from the elementary procedures of handtool skills. To do so would have the effect of directing the worker’s attention away from his attachment to the material substance of his work as well as diverting the channel of his skill away from the perfection of his being, and diverting it towards the external, instrumental circumstances of the means of production. We see this happening all too clearly today where, as a result of the almost total uniformity of machine manufacture, the physical world that sustains us is reduced to no more than raw material to be plundered regardless of cost, and where the amoral and indiscriminate view of the material context of work has slowly led us to poisoning the environment. The crafts, on the other hand, are ecologically wise. They tend not to work against the interests of man and nature but integrate the rhythms and substance of both while at the same time opening a door internally upon states of mind that transcend the necessarily physical conditions by which life proceeds. Let us see how this might be.
The true potter establishes his workshop where nature provides a plentiful supply of clay. He thus digs the substance of his trade himself from the immediate environment. The raw clay must be made ready for his work, a process that is demanding of his physical effort. The physical effort of blending and de-airing the clay allows the potter to establish a rapport with his material, feeling for its possibilities, testing its readiness to receive the imprint of form. For the possibilities of clay belong to clay as to no other substance. Its potentiality for form is unique to itself; the pulse of its life is different from that of wood, or stone or metal. This pulse the potter feels and absorbs in the preparation of his material. What might seem to an outsider to be a form of physical drudgery which could profitably be done away with by the machine, when the tension of aching muscles and the stubborn matter of the clay are integrated, becomes a process of getting acquainted, a subtle process whereby the resistance of the body is resolved and energised and the demands of the ego are stilled. The soul of the potter and the soul of the clay must, after all, become one if there is to be a harmony between the worker and his work. In this necessary transmutation the ego has no place. The potter works on the clay as if on himself. Intuitively he is possessed by the ‘not-self’ of the clay’s substance, drawing it into his own being. Thus the clay becomes the perfect instrument to embody his intention. What the clay expresses is nothing other than the potter’s being at the same time as it expresses what it is its own nature to be. The form of the worked clay becomes the substance of the potter, being as it is drawn towards its own perfection. The clay has only a potentiality for form. The form of the pot is within the potter and is renewed endlessly through the plasticity of the clay’s substance. This process is not what is ordinarily meant by ‘self-expression’.

What has happened in all this (and we might illustrate this process by reference to any craft, I have merely chosen the primordial art of the potter) is that by developing the habit of prolonged concentration upon a repetitive task the potter induces in himself a state of physical and mental polarization, and a state of receptivity whereby the conscious effort of actually forming his material becomes unconscious and effortless. And this in itself allows his inspiration to flow unheeded and for the resulting work to express — embody would be a better word — those hidden possibilities of beauty that reside, as it were, objectively
in the clay. The object of the whole operation is not to express — and here ‘express’ is the right word — the aesthetic ideas of the potter. You can test this for yourselves by examining the contents of any museum or book that displays traditional craft objects. What is striking in each instance is the totally unselfconscious nature of these artefacts, their freedom from the idiosyncracies of the personality of their makers, the manner in which they eschew idiosyncratic contrivance, and where all painstaking effort seems to evaporate in a beauty at one with the nature of the materials in question.

Having said all this I do not have to remind you that beauty is a doorway onto the Sacred. The object that is made beautiful in the sense defined above, embodies something of the divine beauty since, as St. Dionysius says, ‘The Beauty of God is the cause of the being of all that is’. In the final analysis the beauty of workmanship engendered by the craft traditions is the expression of normal workmanship — that is, work with a ‘spiritual core’ — and is no different from the beauty and the spirit that underlies all things. True work is for the sake of contemplation. To labour truly is to pray. For this reason it is possible to say that normal workmanship carries the same import as a passage of scripture where truth is mediated through colour, pattern, shape and substance rather than through words. The work of the Gothic cathedral builders speaks with the same voice as Gothic spirituality. There is as much a message of non-attachment to the ego in a Sung vase as there is in a Zen text.

From what I have said so far it is perhaps clear that the conditions that give rise to the possibility of work with a ‘spiritual core’ are largely incompatible with the conditions of work engendered by machine production and technological industrialisation. Why this should be so needs to be considered. It is not a question of going back to a period of time — to a supposed golden age of human crafts — in order to recapture some imagined paradise on earth. It is really a question of going back to first principles. About all that has been said so far the question arises, production by whom and for whom? In craft-based work the answer is at best, if not unfailingly, by man for God. In industrial-based work the answer becomes by machine for profits. Both come about as a response to human needs but each method envisages a very different level of reference as to what constitutes human need.

When we talk about human needs we have to remember that our needs, in order to conform with our nature, are not determined by our
natural appetites but by our intelligence as spiritual beings. It is by virtue of the intuition of our spiritual nature and not by our appetites, or by rational thought processes, that we understand what we are. Which is to say we understand that we are not, as creatures, sufficient unto ourselves. That we are able to regard our appetites, our passions, our desires, objectively as part of our nature proves the possibility of our being raised to a level above them. So, we have to conclude that whatever is required to bring about our human perfectability constitutes our needs. As Plotinus says: ‘In the matter of the arts and crafts, all that can be traced to the needs of human nature are laid up in the perfect man.’ (V,9,14). But this in no way of necessity entails that our natural attachment to the material conditions of life is to be regarded as of little or no consequence. If it were so then the natural world could never serve as the type of a hidden spiritual order of things.

In satisfying human needs, then, we have two different instrumental modes, one the hand tool and one the machine. What is different, inherently, in each of these modes and what effect does it produce in the worker? Apart from the quite obvious fact that it is in the nature of the hand tool that it leaves the workman responsible for how a thing gets made, while in the case of the machine how and what gets made is largely determined by the machine itself, so that the machine minder is responsible to the machine, the difference is one of rhythm.

To make something by hand is a slow process, it requires commitment, patience, aptitude and skill such as is only gained over a long period of gradual mastery, during which the character of the worker is also formed. The tool draws upon the unwritten and accumulated wisdom of past usage. The hand, and its extension, the tool, challenge the inner resources of the workman in a direct way. His mastery of the working situation must operate in such a way that there is a vital accord between mental concentration, physical exertion and the material properties of the substance worked to the degree, as we have seen, that he lives in his work. What he produces is vibrant with a life and a human signature that is missing from the uniform products of the machine. Why else should we feel nostalgia at the artefacts of the past but for the fact that they have been invested with a quality of human involvement that is so evidently absent from the mass produced products that surround us. We feel in such artefacts something of the pulse that is common to the pulse of our own being.

By contrast the essence of the machine product is uniformity. To the
rhythms of life and the rhythms of nature the machine is indifferent if not disruptive. Although the technical development of the machine is based upon a cumulative knowledge, for the machine operator the wisdom of past methods of production is neutralized by continually rendering it obsolete. In this sense the machine has no history, where in contrast the tool is an instrument of continuity. The organic link that binds one generation to another in mutual interdependency, and which involves the sense of husbanding resources wisely is severed by a mechanization that responds only to the economic imperative. The machine alienates its operator from the material he works by dictating the rhythm of his work instead of the material itself dictating the rhythm by the mutual response of give and take of physical effort and mutual resistance. The continual technical development of the machine projects forward to an uncertain future and is disruptive of those natural rhythms of renewal and consumption that are conserved by the tool. In a machine culture production outpaces the natural parameters of human consumption. The unnatural abundance of material goods in an industrial society is the artificial production of an amoral urban proletariat out of touch with nearly all direct experience of life-sustaining resources. In a craft culture, which is in a sense a flowering of nature that addresses itself to heaven, production fosters the primary human qualities of resourcefulness, self-reliance and moral integrity in the context of man's obligation and responsibility to his natural environment. What in the tool is the possibility of a reciprocal exertion and contemplation open to the spiritual dimension, becomes in the machine a sort of diabolic ingenuity and contrivance that kills the soul through the suffocation of relentless pace. In other words, and by way of summary, the tool produces according to human needs, the machine regardless of human needs.

All of these distinctions are inherent in the idea that there is a difference of rhythm as between the tool and the machine, distinctions that should give us pause for thought when we consider why it should be that industrial work practices are incompatible with conditions that allow man to have a spiritual core to his work. Nothing is easier than to point to the innumerable ways in which we have benefited from the machine. That goes without saying. But who has the same spirit of confident dependence after reflecting upon the direction and final goal towards which the machine blindly projects us? There is little point in arguing that life is more comfortable and convenient for the mass of
men and women (which is far from being incontrovertible in any case) than it has ever been before if we do not consider at the same time the ultimate price of this achievement. Instead of a world shaped by human needs themselves responsible to the sacred dimension we are faced with an artificial environment that remorselessly progresses towards a future that no one can accurately envisage let alone claim to have determined. We are constantly being exhorted to invest our future unquestioningly in this blind enterprise.

In looking back to the craft cultures; in recognising the essentially spiritual character of the arts and crafts of the sacred traditions; in studying tool-made artefacts as a repository of wisdom through the means of symbolism and initiative practices, there is no need to deceive ourselves that such things will be recaptured by our merely willing it to happen. We know that this cannot be the case. Our world has not yet finished with its self-mutilation. But in so far as we are human and able to recognise for that very reason that we are made in the image of God, so we are able to address ourselves to the truth that is above and beyond the necessary contingencies of our historical circumstances. By that much we may yet be able to avoid falling victim to historical fatalism. If we are to seek some ultimate cure for the sickness Simone Weil spoke of then surely we must first establish the nature of the disease. The very least we might achieve in taking stock of past cultures of people for whom work and the sacred were an organic unity is to have, in a positive sense, some measure of what we have fallen from. Rather this, surely, than to conclude negatively that we are merely the victims of events we have neither the power to control nor the will to understand. The predominant forces of persuasion at work in our society point to the implicit belief that technological development will in the not too distant future rid us of work altogether. Each stage of this development is ushered in on the strength of a convenience that does away with a degree of effort. That such a Utopian dream goes hand in hand with our possible destruction is no coincidence. It is certainly the projection of a false image of man. And if we are to offer any effective resistance to this idea it can only be on the basis of our understanding of how the crafts have provided the norm of workmanship in fostering and safeguarding the inter-relationship between man and the sacred.
Nature: House of the Soul

KATHLEEN RAIN

If there is one theme upon which I—upon which any human being—should be able to speak without learning, without authority other than our own senses and innate understanding, it is surely nature. For 'nature'—all that we perceive is what each is 'given', along with life itself. No need to be a poet, or a physicist, painter, botanist, astronomer, hunter of animals, gardener, fisherman, alchemist or magician, weatherman, assessor of minerals or physician—no need to be literate or numerate, it is enough to be human. The rest are but a few of the countless ways we may follow into that inexhaustible universe of marvels into which we are born. Never will we reach nature's frontiers, never can we be elsewhere than at its centre. I have myself read countless books, innumerable pages of human thoughts; but in this attempt to approach nature I shall try, at the outset, not to remember but to forget these. I shall not even cite Laurens van der Post's African Bushmen, or the North American or Australian indigenous people, though these, nature being their only literacy, could tell more than perhaps any man of learning of nature and its many powers. Instead I shall try to begin by speaking not from any acquired knowledge (much or little counts for nothing at all in this respect), but solely as the child I was—the child each of us was—born into this world without any of the adventitious aids of what we later in life call 'knowledge'. Did not the learned Thomas Aquinas call his great work of theology so much straw in the light of that vision of reality itself which came to him at the end of his years of labour? He spoke of a mystical vision; I speak only of what every child sees who opens eyes on this world. But in the light of the morning sunshine falling on a leaf or raindrop, whether on the loveliest of gardens or wild places or on a plastic container or a scrap-heap, I too would have to say that all I have studied is so much straw.

However much we have learned, what is given at birth, unsought, is incomparably, immeasurably more. Given with life itself, inseparable from what we are, we have no need to learn or study that on which our eyes open, our ears hear, our fingers touch. We have only to look and to
listen. Rather than understanding nature better by learning more, we have to unlearn, to un-know, if we hope to recapture a glimpse of that paradisal vision. Nature is vision — epiphany — indeed theophany; the discourse of life itself as it shows itself in and through the myriad forms of the natural world. She is also the Veiled Goddess, whose veil, according to an ancient inscription at Sais, no man has lifted. But nature is not the kind of mystery that can be 'solved', as in a Sherlock Holmes story, in which something that at first seemed marvellous and even awe-inspiring proves to be something simple and trivial. On the contrary: the investigator may remove veil after veil, but the scientist, be he manipulator of genetic codes or the astro-physicist concerned with origins and causes can come no nearer to seeing the face of the veiled goddess than did her worshippers in ancient Egypt. Nature — and Blake so understood the symbol of the veiled goddess, so ancient, so archetypal — is the veil. In Indian terms, Nature is maya, appearances. The veil has no substantial existence other than as the expression on the face of being, or, as Plotinus understood, a mirror in which soul sees itself. According to the myth of Cupid and Psyche, nature is the house of the generated soul, in which Psyche's attendants and servants are the elements and creatures of the natural world.

It is not my intention to denigrate the study of nature in whatever form. Her field of marvels extends before us in whatever direction we travel. As a student I set out to become a botanist, and whatever little I learned of the world of the plants has only served to enrich the vision of the poet. Nevertheless it must be said that the presuppositions of science (our modern materialist science that is) being purely quantitative and factual, in themselves tend to devaluate the very marvels the scientist sets out to study. Many scientists — being human — no doubt have retained the sense of wonder and awe; as did the great Albert Einstein, who wrote:

The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive form — this knowledge, this feeling is at the centre of true religiousness.
The Cosmic religious experience is the strongest and oldest mainspring of scientific research. My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.

I am not one of those who would denigrate the natural sciences, as such and pursued as a part of the wholeness of knowledge. But scientific research and atheism too often go together. If a renewal of the sacred is a need of our civilization so essential that it is becoming clear to ever-increasing numbers of people that we cannot go on as we are, it is because the quantitative scientific approach to nature – and this is the basis of our modern Western civilization – excludes, indeed precludes, the experience, and therefore the knowledge of the sacred, in its most immediate form, as the presence before our eyes of the natural universe.

In this sense, modern science, which claims to be the study of nature, leads us away from, not nearer to, a true and full knowledge of the universe and its ten thousand creatures. In our modern western – or westernized – society, ‘science’ is equated with ‘knowledge’ in a kind of idolatry; whereas the arts are seen as more or less agreeable relaxations, and religion as ‘a private matter’ about which everyone has the right to his own opinion since religion and the arts lie outside the realm of verifiable fact and are in that sense not to be taken seriously in any case. Clearly such a view will no longer do: the scientist’s knowledge of nature and account of nature is a partial one. It is not a total or an adequate knowledge. Adequate to what? Clearly in relation to humanity, since our human nature is the limiting factor of all knowledge whatsoever, scientific knowledge not excepted. What we are limits and determines what we know or can know.

I am not calling in question the value of the scientific description and ‘mapping’ of the phenomena of nature, but merely the right of science to present itself as knowledge of nature, as against the experience of nature in terms of meanings and values of quite another kind. Nature can be weighed and measured – and science is essentially quantification – but it can be known in other ways, in terms not of measurable facts but of immeasurable values, and to that realm of immeasurable
values belong poetry and the other arts. Vision — and we must include the everyday vision of all who open their eyes on this world — can be experienced but cannot be quantified. Vision — epiphany — indeed theophany — belongs to an order not recognized within the terms of our positivist culture. It is the discourse — the revelation — of life as it shows itself in and through the myriad forms of the natural world. Nature is the house no less of our spiritual than of our bodily life, and it is for this reason that poets and all other artists, besides each of us simply because we are able to enjoy and contemplate as well as to consume the world, have the right to be heard; to speak against the blind destruction in the name of utility of the living earth which is our book of wisdom, our spiritual home, our revelation of the divine face.

One might see the scientific method as grounded in the part observing the whole from the standpoint of its separation. Science observes that of which we are in reality — or from another standpoint — a part, as an ‘object’ — that is, as separate and other. This can yield knowledge of a certain kind — ‘objective’ knowledge of nature. Yet one might see presumption in the attempt itself of the part to pronounce on the whole, as if human reason were the supreme and sole arbiter in an otherwise mindless universe. If not inherent in the scientific method as such, it is certain that such attitudes have grown up alongside this secular mode of thought, and limit the consciousness of our Western culture.

So in order to rediscover the experience of nature that underlies all later uses and theories we must go back to something more primordial, pristine, innate. Is it possible to remember back to the kind of knowledge we had of our world before inner and outer became separate, before nature became an ‘object’ of which we had questions to ask, wishes to satisfy, all those human curiosities and wants and needs that lead us to put nature to our own uses and purposes? To a time when we had no questions to reduce wonder to curiosity, delight to greed of possession, fear to the desire to destroy? Can we recall the face of the world as we first looked upon it, and it upon us? It is this knowledge of being that the poet seeks, a knowledge not of something other but a kind of self-knowledge, through continual dialogue of inner and outer. What is our own earliest memory? Mine is, or seems to be, of looking up into a multitude of pink small flowers (later I knew the name of the bush — a flowering currant) and the aspect of that
flowering tree returns to me with the impression of seeing each subtle
detail of flower and petal, an impression of beautiful precision of form,
an unsurprised total perception of something not at all strange,
recognized, as it were. It was there, a total presence. Later, as I learned
the flowers in my mother's garden and in the waste places and by the
roadsides, it seems to me that each was a recognition, a form, totally
apprehended — fivefold before I could count five, symmetrical before I
could double or treble. Simply, and totally, present. There was no
learning, but simply seeing. Birds and animals were instantaneous
visions of creatures that appeared, in all their magical panoply of wings
and eyes, with a quality of unquestioned knowledge, before flowers had
names, or flames, or rain-drops running down a window-pane. Later
life has only made all these familiar things remote: they were never so
known as before I knew anything at all.

I recall a passage in Coleridge in which he tells how he carried his
baby son out into the night to look at the moon — Coleridge himself
loved the moon with a kind of passion; and at the sight of that
primordial wonder the baby stopped crying. Why should looking at
the moon — or at a glittering coloured ball on a Christmas tree — stop a
baby's crying? You cannot eat the moon, it gives neither warmth nor
food: Why does the light of the moon please a baby? If this question
seems a foolish one I have failed to lead you towards the mystery of that
primordial, not to be analysed experience of all human — perhaps of all
sentient beings — of the light of the world. Eighteenth century
philosophers — I am thinking especially of Locke — saw the infant mind
as a tabula rasa receiving all its knowledge through sense-impressions;
therefore the infant mind can be 'formed' by education. The theory has
lingeried on in the twentieth-century American theory of 'behaviour-
ism' which speaks of 'conditioning' our responses. These can be
manipulated no doubt — or why is money spent on advertising — but
what then are those clear first impressions, so ineffaceable, so
intimately known and recognised and understood? What is it that we
know when we see our first flowering tree, our first bird, moon,
pebbles on the path, running water? Our first pheasant in a wood, cat,
cups hanging on a dresser, pany-face? We know them not from
learning by experience but with a total and immediate recognition. We
do not need to know about them in order to know them, as if they spoke
to some knowledge innate in us. Nature's marvels tell themselves as
words in a language. The poetry of nature is not the words we write
about nature: it is all that the language of nature makes known to us.

It is as if knower and known, light and sight, seer and seen, are from
the first inseparable. By the materialist science of recent centuries
nature and consciousness have long been held to be separate. Yeats
near the end of his life foresaw and predicted 'that in two or three
generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory
has no reality, that the natural and supernatural are knit together'. His
prophecy has already been fulfilled, and few scientists would now
claim otherwise than for purposes of convenience that the measurable
world can be separated from the mind of the observer. The mechanical
theory of nature is now an obsolete hypothesis, and the unus mundus of
the unity of mind and nature sought by the early renaissance thinkers is
once again becoming credible. And if inner and outer are indeed 'knit
together', knowledge is inherent in, and inherited with, that of which
we are made; knower and known, nature and we who perceive it, are
one and the same, all our knowledge of nature is in reality self-
knowledge. Unnamed and unnameable, that knower unerringly,
totally, experiences, with intimate familiarity, shell or flower or bird or
tree. Inner and outer are attuned to this fundamental recognition
which is also innate knowledge of the 'other' we call nature.

And that from the dawn of consciousness. However we may regard
that aspect of time which we call 'evolution', it is a term which, in a
time-world, we must use descriptively whether or not we share the
materialist view of natural causality. We are situated in time. Plato calls
Time 'an image moving according to number of eternity abiding as
one'. Viewing time in this sense, as the mode in which we experience
the ever-present, how unconceivably old we are! When (using the word
'when' in relation to the timeless origin of time) did our consciousness
begin? Our innate knowledge is cosmic knowledge — the self-
knowledge of the cosmos. Poetic inspiration is a reality known to all
times and places (with the possible exception of our own). Taliesin, the
inspired child-bard of Welsh mythology, claims knowledge of the
whole creation. Vernon Watkins is the latest of a long poetic tradition
which springs from the Taliesin legend and has thus paraphrased the
Welsh original in 'Taliesin and the Mockers':
Before men walked
I was in these places.
I was here
When the mountains were laid.

I am as light
To eyes long blind,
I, the stone
Upon every grave.

I saw black night
Flung wide like a curtain,
I looked up
At the making of stars.

I stood erect
At the birth of rivers.
I observed
The designing of flowers.

– and Taliesin goes on to describe the days of the creation of the world,
whose term is the creation of man. Taliesin the child speaks for all
humanity when he says

Ask my age
You shall have no answer.
I saw the building
Of Babel's tower.

I was a lamp
In Solomon's temple.
I, the reed
Of an auguring wind.

The living imagination – the Spirit, the Self – knows all things, not
‘objectively’ but by participation.

When did the ‘matter’ of which our physical frames are composed,
begin? There is no break in the totality of being, in the continuity of
‘nature’, from the ‘fiat lux’ of creation. Modern science too sees light as
the origin of all that has followed in the continuity of ‘nature’ in its work
of ‘formation, transformation’ – Goethe's words – of which we, like
wave-crests in an unending sea, are moments. The life in us derives
from an immemorial past, it has never not been, it will never not be.
Indeed beginning and ending are terms of temporal succession, which
is only as the whole manifestation of creation appears to our physical senses. But whether we conceive that totality as unending Time or as a boundless Now, we are indivisibly woven into the One, that All, we are what ‘nature’ has generated, ‘nature’ which is what we know not by observation but because ‘nature’ is what we are, and we are nature’s knowledge and self-knowledge, an unfathomable knowledge that is inseparable from being. Inconceivably ancient is this self-knowledge of being, older than memory, older than history, than man, than the animals or earliest living organisms who were our first selves. Do we not go back to the rocks, to the water, to fire, to the first created light? Differentiated and individualized as we are, our life is rooted in the boundless, timeless, beginningless and unending whole which we know as ‘nature’. Where do we ourselves begin and end? Earth, air, fire and water flow continually through our bodies; they enter us and leave us and our bodies are no more ourselves or ours than the flame of a candle perpetually consuming and renewing itself. And in this unbroken continuity with the entire manifestation we know as nature, just as we may say that we are a part of its whole, so equally we may say that it is a part of our whole, for we are not limited, we are not parts and divisions except in appearance and as it seems to our senses. We contain within our field of being whatever is or presents itself to us, not as something outside and other than ourselves, but just as our bodies are continuous with the elements, so is all that is visible, audible, tangible to us, continuous with our total field of knowledge, our total consciousness.

It was this realization which underlies the ancient conception of the soul of the world, the anima mundi of the Platonists, continued in the Western esoteric tradition which refused the mechanistic science which nevertheless gradually gained ground in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and remains current in our own even if no longer unquestioned. Blake, himself an inheritor of this tradition of the unus mundus wrote of the ‘wrenching apart’ of the inner and outer, nature and the soul, as a mutilation which deprives nature of its informing life and at the same time banishes humanity from a living universe; for nature so externalized becomes a machine, a mechanism, not a Presence, and, finally, we have come to see ourselves as parts within that machine, a meaningless accident in a mindless universe. One hears such things said – ‘behaviourism’ is one still current example – in all
seriousness which to earlier and other civilisations would have been seen as the reductio ad absurdum of all meaning or discussion whatsoever. Yeats in our own century took up the theme from his master Blake when he too challenged the view of man 'passive before a mechanized nature'. According to the alternative view – that of the Platonists and their successors, including the poets of Imagination – Coleridge, Shelley, Blake and Yeats – Imagination is the creative power itself.

* * *

In reality neither the observer nor the object are the absolutes the materialist view has long presumed them to be. Blake understood this very well when he wrote:

The sun's light when he unfolds it
Depends on the organ that beholds it.

Plotinus had said the same – we are able to behold the sun because there is a 'sun-like' nature in the eye which sees it.

Other civilizations – I think above all of India – recognize that consciousness is itself a variable, whose range can contract or expand. It is not the invariable constant rationalist thinkers have supposed. Indeed in other civilizations effort has been directed not to the manipulation of 'nature' as in the modern West, but to the enlarging of consciousness, of the mind which perceives. Blake’s reply to Locke was to speak not of the observed object but of 'the faculty which experiences'; and for him – for 'the man of Imagination' nature is 'one continued vision of fancy or Imagination'. 'He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God', Blake wrote. 'He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only.' (K.98)

Not only the organs of sense but the state of mind of the observer, changes of mood which fluctuate continually, and more radical changes of consciousness of which Eastern philosophies are well aware, and of which in the West the cruder method of psychedelic drugs has somewhat brutally reminded us. Whereas the modern West has sought to manipulate nature in ways, increasingly violent, desecrational and obscene, the East, on the contrary, has given its thought to the control and expansion of consciousness itself. Only in this century are we again becoming aware of the relativity of 'nature' to our perception of it, not merely through changes in our sense-organs but
through far more subtle variations in our mental awareness. Visionary transformations of consciousness such as ‘nature-mystics’ have reported, are probably more common than has been recognised in a culture that has no place for the knowledge such changes of perception imply. There can be few who have not at some time seen the world undergo some miraculous transformation whose source lies in ourselves. Here I speak from the experience of having witnessed half a lifetime ago the sudden but unforgettable transformation of a plant on my table, before my eyes, into a flow of living light, which was, at the same time, not separate from myself, was indeed a living part of myself. The experience was one of perceiving what can only be described as ‘the holy’. At the same time I was aware that I was seeing more, not less, of reality than in my normal state. My mother, in her late old age, told me of having herself had a similar experience as a young girl, which she had never forgotten. To those who see nature as an object, can we not reply that nature is an experience? It is not the conclusions of Western materialism but its premisses which are in question.

That is only an extreme – although not so very rare – example of the variability of our experience of ‘nature’. But to put it more simply, and without recourse to the exceptional states of the nature-mystic, authentic as these may be, how can we suppose that our capacity to feel delight and fear, to wonder, to marvel, to experience pity and terror, the mysterious and various experiences of beauty and meaning, innate in us, could conceivably be there unless appropriate to our situation in the natural world, and without any objective correlative? Objectivity is deemed a scientific virtue, a detached scrutiny of the object to be weighed and measured; but if the world of nature were the mechanism supposed by a materialist science, then all the great range and gamut of human responses would become meaningless. When this happens, what but alienation, violence, and mental breakdown can be expected? As indeed we see on all sides. Because we possess these faculties, they must be appropriate to our world, and those aspects of nature which inspire and match them speak to us of realities of the soul which they serve to awaken. And of this discourse poetry and the other arts are the language; matching images given every day before our eyes, to the whole range of meanings and values to which those symbols give access.
All too much modern Western – above all modern English – so-called ‘nature poetry’, is a by-product of Western materialist science – meticulous descriptions of the visible aspect of some landscape or plant or creature, a matching of descriptive word (or in a painting matching colour for colour) to scale or fin; a kind of photography. In fact the camera – a mechanism – is the true eye of the machine age and of a materialist ideology, a mechanism that can reproduce the sensible appearance of mountain or desert, fish or lion or rose – of all those natural creatures that have from time immemorial been the images by which poets and painters have evoked the whole scale of meanings and emotions. As for description, our machines can do that for us: what, then, can the Imagination see in nature that the camera cannot? I have suggested that for childhood knowledge is being: what we know is what we are, by participation, by empathy, and by reading ‘the language of nature’. The imagination knows nature from within before we stray away and become separate and cut off from it, mere observers scrutinizing from without what formerly we knew from within; man looking out, as Blake says, through ‘narrow chinks of his cavern’. Have we not all the memory of having once been inside nature, as it were, instead of wandering on the outside looking for a door through which to find our way back into our native place or state? We try to recapture that living experience in which we knew nature not as an object, a thing, but as alive. Blake understood that through the materialist ideology we have lost access to the living experience of nature and describes that closed rationalist mind for whom

... A Rock, a Cloud, a Mountain,
Were now not Vocal as in Climes of happy Eternity
Where the lamb replies to the infant voice, & the lion to the man of years
Giving them sweet instructions; where the Cloud, the River & the Field
Talk with the husbandman & shepherd

(K.315 FZ vi 134–7)

Cloud river and field express meanings which cannot be measured or quantified. Our universe is a living universe; and Blake’s child and shepherd live in a state of continuous communication with its Presence; something we have perhaps all known at some time. Has not the blackbird sung to us music we understood?

Today as I
Looked up at the sky’s great face
I saw the bright heavens gaze
Down upon me.
Some, like Blake, have never lost that state of paradisal participation. Samuel Palmer's Shoreham, his 'valley of vision', for a few years opened itself to his painter's devotion. Sun and stars, trees, clouds, birds, every creature, are words in the language which the universe itself speaks. The pre-literate Bushman of Africa, the Australian Aborigines, and all children know that language in which all that exists in nature has meaning and value. We witness an unending discourse of the Spirit of creation; but we no longer look, no longer listen as we speed along motorways in our machines, insulate ourselves from the music of wind or waves and leaves and rain with transistor radio-sets that shut out this unceasing sacred discourse. Yet when at moments we attend, is it not with a sense of homecoming?

Let us look, finally, at some instances of the greatest nature-poetry that has been written; far indeed from the photographic descriptive writing of modern secular poetry. When the psalmist wrote 'I will lift mine eyes to the hills, whence cometh my help' he was not describing the appearance of the hills but an essential imaginative experience of something every culture has expressed in countless myths of the hills and mountains being places high above human sorrows, immaculate places where no human foot has trod, where the gods live, be it on Olympus, Mount Kailasa, or the Hopi Amerindian sacred mountain, San Francisco; where of late their modern white successors have built a ski-slope. Western man climbs mountains in order to 'conquer' nature – a notion far from those to whom they were holy places of imaginative power, symbols of the highest meanings and values attainable to us. Those who lived on their foothills were pilgrims and holy men, none trespassed on their sacred summits. Or take the wind – again in the Bible the wind is the vehicle of the holy spirit, 'who maketh the clouds his chariot; who walketh upon the wings of the wind'. The wind is the breath of life, its spiritual power indivisibly one with its nature. What is said of the wind could equally be said of the Spirit. John the Baptist, the prophet in the desert, inspired by the Spirit, is likened to 'a reed shaken by the wind'; Vernon Watkins' 'reed of an auguring wind'. In St. John's Gospel again, wind and Spirit are one and indivisible 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, and thou canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one
that is born of the spirit.' At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was perceived by the disciples of Jesus as 'the sound as of a mighty wind'. As in the Bible, so in the Vedas. This passage from the Rig Veda (translated by Raymundo Panikkar) again is not a simile which merely compares wind with the Holy Spirit – the two are inseparably one in the sublime language of nature which is the vehicle of sacred meaning:

Oh! the Wind's chariot, its power and its glory!
   It passes by crashing.
   Out streak the lightnings, dust rises on earth.
   The Wind passes.

   The hosts of the Wind speed onward after him,
   like women assembling.
   The king of the world lifts them up in his chariot
   Through lofty regions.

   He speeds on air's pathways, he rests not nor slumbers
   for even a day.
   First-born, the Waters' friend, the righteous, whence came he?
   How was he born?

   Breath of the Gods and life germ of the universe,
   freely he wanders.
   We bring him our homage, whose voice may be heard
   but whose form is not seen.

As with wind, so with fire, water, cloud, trees and forests, seas and rivers – all these, in ancient poetry of whatever quarter of the world, are the profound language of meanings as humanity has discovered these in an endless dialectic of inner experience seeking, 'as it were asking for' as Coleridge says, its natural symbol and correspondence.

The Alchemical teaching of the 'Smaragdine Table of Hermes Trismegistus', 'That which is above is like that which is beneath, and that which is beneath is like that which is above, to work the unity of one thing' is the underlying principle of the Alchemical theory of 'signatures', which had application in many fields. According to this view of nature – in total contradiction to the mechanistic theory – everything in nature, every herb, animal, metal, gem, natural element or part of the human body (since microcosm mirrors macrocosm) has its correspondence with an order of cause 'on high' – 'above' – popularly known as 'the stars' but of course not in a mechanistic sense, 'the stars' themselves being yet one more region of the Imagination
expressed in the language of nature. The Cabbalistic ‘Tree of God’ is another powerful symbol expressing the unity of all things. The roots of this Tree are above, its branches and fruits below. Yet the divine Spirit circulates through the whole of manifested being, no less present in the lowest (the material) world, than in the unapproachable source. ‘God is in the lowest effects as in the highest causes’ Blake says; and he is speaking from within a tradition which he knew in several forms, all alike in their rejection of the mechanistic universe. Quite recently Gaston Bachelard, the French phenomenologist, found his way back into the world of nature as a language of meanings, and wrote those illuminating books on the four elements, L’eau et les Rêves, L’Air et les Songes, and the rest – explorations of the rich correspondences of which poetry of Imagination is full. Shelley’s sky-lark soaring in air is not described feather by feather and bone by bone, but carries the spirit of the beholder into the heavens of song. Edgar Allen Poe’s sombre waters mirror the melancholy of the poet’s death-wish; Neitzsche’s mountains summon to conquest, and the acorn-cup and small snail-shell are nature’s secret hiding-places and refuges from our fears. In Imagination we hide in acorn-cups like Shakespeare’s fairies, move with wave and river and cloud, enter strange pure worlds of weightless reflections on water, finding throughout nature the correspondence of every mood. At every moment, nature itself, presenting to us its chasms and heights, its flux and its shadows, evokes in us those correspondences through which we come to know ourselves; while we seek and find in nature the correspondences of our subtlest moods and intuitions. And the artists and poets are the interpreters of the language nature presents continually to the soul.

For throughout the materialist centuries it was the poets who kept faith with the living universe, until recent times when poetry itself ceased to mediate the meanings and values of that language, capitulating to the reductionist and materialist view of nature as a mindless mechanism. I hope that time is over. Blake kept faith; basing his wonderful passages about nature on the teachings of Swedenborg, whose ‘correspondences’ were a heritage from the alchemical ‘signatures’. Every creature, according to Swedenborg, is a living spirit whose bodily form is a ‘correspondence’ of its living nature; all of them embodiments of ‘spirits, of different orders and capacities’. Wordsworth is on the whole a Newtonian, describing nature as he perceived it – though with
magnificent exceptions — whereas for Blake all nature is alive;

Thou seest the Constellations in the deep and wondrous Night: They rise in order and continue their immortal courses
Upon the mountain & in vales with harp & heavenly song, With flute & clarion, with cups & measures fill'd with foaming wine. Glitt'ring the streams reflect the Vision of beatitude, And the calm Ocean joys beneath & smooths his awful waves: These are the Sons of Los, & these the Labourers of the Vintage. Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer Upon the sunny brooks & meadows: every one the dance Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave: Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance, To touch each other & recede, to cross & change & return: These are the Children of Los; thou seest the Trees on mountains, Uttering prophecies & speaking instructive words to the sons Of men; These are the Sons of Los: These the Visions of Eternity, But we see only as it were the hem of their garments When with our vegetable eyes we view these wondrous visions.

Shelley too had his West Wind, which he summoned — invoked — in terms not far from those of the Vedas:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

— and the poet prays to that spirit to ‘Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is’. Shelley had read the Bhagavad Geeta and other Indian texts — so indeed had Blake, and of course Yeats who acknowledges the works of both these poets among his sacred books. And last of all we come to the fullest, clearest statement of the alternative understanding of nature — alternative that is to the secular materialist view — that of the Vedas and the Upanishads and the Geeta. ‘Everything that lives is holy’, Blake wrote: what does he mean? A mechanism is by definition lifeless, but every manifestation of life, every guise assumed by the living Self of the universe — Blake’s Imagination — can be so described because it can be so experienced. For the holy — the sacred — is an experience, not the quality of an object. Only as such can it be known. The alternative to nature as mechanism is nature as theophany; and that theophany the self-knowledge of being itself.

What we have experienced, we know: what else is knowledge? So, in that chapter of the Mahabharata, which dates from some fifteen hundred years before our era, known as the Baghavad Geeta, the Lord Krishna,
manifesting himself as the friend and charioteer of the Pandava warrior Arjuna, gave the teaching: it is the Self, the universal Mind or Spirit, unborn and undying, who in the words of Krishna answers Arjuna's question, 

What is Nature, what is Matter, and what is the Self? What is that they call Wisdom?

And Krishna answers, 

xiii.2. O Arjuna! The body of man is the playground of the Self; and that which knows the activities of Matter, sages call the Self. I am the Omniscient Self that abides in the playground of matter; knowledge of Matter and of the all-knowing Self is wisdom.

The Lord Krishna speaks of the great truth which man ought to know since by its means he will win immortal bliss, that which is without beginning, the Eternal Spirit which dwells in Me, neither with form, nor yet without it.

Everywhere are Its hands and Its feet, everywhere it has eyes that see, heads that think, and mouths that speak; everywhere It listens; It dwells in all the worlds; It envelopes them all. Beyond the senses, It yet shines through every sense perception. Bound to nothing, It yet sustains everything. Unaffected by the qualities It still enjoys them all.

The supreme Self is the one life of the universe, and also the life of man the microcosm.

This does not constitute 'pantheism' in the sense of understanding 'God' to be merely the sum of whatever is in nature – a notion which is itself coloured by a mechanistic model of the natural universe, to which the concept of the divine 'person' implies a demiurger who makes worlds as a workman makes tables and chairs. The supreme Self of Vedanta, the Mind of the Hermetica, Boehme's and Blake's Imagination of God is a Person in a sense far otherwise, is the ultimate sat-chit-ananda (being, consciousness, bliss) of life itself. Not matter but living Being is the ultimate ground, and since consciousness belongs to living mind, a Person. The natural world is a manifestation of eternal Being, a living universe not an object. This, however, is not to say that the divine Self does not also transcend what we can know as 'nature':

It is only a very small part of My Eternal Self, which is the life of this universe, drawing round itself the six senses, the mind the last, which have their source in Nature.
When the Supreme Lord enters a body or leaves it, He gathers these senses together and travels on with them, as the wind gathers perfume while passing through the flowers . . .
There are two aspects in Nature; the perishable and the imperishable. All life in this world belongs to the former, the unchanging element belongs to the latter.
But higher than all am I, the Supreme God, the Absolute Self, the Eternal Lord, who pervades the worlds and upholds them all.

As the Geeta so in the Hermetica, whose tenth Book contains these words:

133. The Divine way will everywhere meet thee, and everwhere be seen of thee, plain and easy, when thou dost not expect or look for it; it will meet thee, waking, sleeping, sailing, travelling, by night, by day, when thou speakest, and when thou keepest silence.
134. For there is nothing which is not the Image of God.
135. And yet thou sayest, God is invisible, but be advised, for who is more manifest than He?
136. For therefore bath he made all things that thou by all things mayest see him.
137. This is the Good of God, this is his Virtue, to appear, and to be seen in all things.

Had Shelley too remembered the Baghavad Geeta together with the Platonic philosophers when in Hellas he made his sage, Ahasuerus, speak of

... the One
The unborn and the undying. Earth and Ocean,
Space, and the isles of life or light that gem
The sapphire floods of interstellar air,
This firmament pavilioned upon chaos
With all its cressets of immortal fire

... this Whole
Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers
With all the silent or tempestuous workings
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,
Is but a vision . . .
Thought is its cradle and its grave, nor less
The Future, and the Past are idle shadows
Of thought's eternal flight – they have no being:
Nought is but that which feels itself to be.
These and like words speak, I suggest, the ultimate understanding of what 'nature' is. Nor is such knowledge inaccessible, demanding some special discipline possessed by few: no, it is a vision innate in all, those 'thoughts of man that have been hid of old' of which Blake writes, the vision of infancy before epiphany is obscured by ideology. So understood nature is the house not of the body alone but of the soul, the source not only of physical sustenance, but beyond that, our inexhaustible treasury of knowledge and meaning.
Reviews

Weaving the Rainbow


If there is a scale of perception in the visual world equivalent to that in the aural world which ranges from tone-deafness to perfect pitch, Winifred Nicholson certainly had the visual equivalent of perfect pitch. 'As a child and ever since', she wrote (p. 23).

'I have painted rainbows – the mathematics of colour, their sequence as true in painting as in music or the multiplication table – their appearing or disappearing as unreal as myth or fairy tale. Who can find the pot of gold at the rainbow's foot where it touches earth? Who can see the colour at either end of the rainbow beyond ultra-violet, before infra-red? Some people can, some people can't. Goethe called it “peach-colour”. What a name for anything so magic – except that peaches are not the colour we are speaking of, and so it is as good a word as any of those others that we use for colour – those sensations that are indescribable in words. We speak of them as canaries, as lemons, as sunflowers, if we are trying to evoke yellows. But where does it go when the crimson flashlight blinds it, or the red car I drive comes into the electric illumination of Carlisle and my car becomes neutral dun?'

When I stayed with Winifred Nicholson at Bankshead in 1977, she had been given the prism that took her into that dimension of painting which culminated her life and work, the dimension of Unknown Colour. This is the title of the book, in which her paintings, letters and writings have been brought together by her son Andrew Nicholson. It is not a biography but a compilation of what Winifred called 'Blinks', 'Moments of Light'. 'What I have tried to do' she wrote, 'is to paint pictures that can call down colour, so that a picture can be a lamp in one's home, not merely a window'. This certainly she achieved, and in this book her son has lovingly presented every page like a candle burning with the steady prismatic flame she painted. (p. 249 'Candle, Eigg', and 'First Prismatic', Temenos 8). Here are letters from Winifred and Ben Nicholson, letters to their children and friends – Mondrian, Christopher Wood, Kathleen Raine; there are her thoughts expressed in exhibition catalogues, miniature essays on colour; and recollections of her life. She tells of walking as a child in the high glen with her grandfather the Earl of
Carlisle, among the beech trees and in moss and mud, and how her grandfather told her that Dante had said the colour of angel’s wings was the colour of young beech leaves. She touches briefly on her childhood in Naworth Castle, filled with pre-Raphaelite paintings. Then she describes her meeting and honeymoon with Ben Nicholson, to whom she was married in 1920. Readers who do not realize the almost religious fervour of those involved in the artistic revolution at that time, a new vision purged of the past and of all outworn unnecessary embellishments, may be taken aback by Winifred’s dismissive description of the Italian cities they visited on their honeymoon:

‘Naples — there was a beggar we did not like so we took the train away. Venice — the canals were smelly. Rome — well, we did not linger in Rome. Portofino — we went to see Max Beerbohm, he had a deep ultramarine blue room with a dazzling bright terrace outside, and many witty jokes. Ben did not like my navy blue coat and skirt — it was plain and boring.’

With idealistic puritanical fervour the palettes of the pre-Raphaelites were dismissed — green and violet were evil, only red, blue and yellow were pure. Describing Paris in the ‘twenties and ‘thirties Winifred wrote:

‘These were years of inspiration — fizzing like a soda-water bottle’ (not of course like champagne). ‘The 1914 war was over, the war to end all future wars — poverty and tyranny were to be things of the past. The future was unknown, but would mean expanding thought on all sides. Boundaries and barriers were broken down. We lived in white houses with large windows, we ate simple foods — the fruits of the earth. We wore sandals and ran barefoot along the boulevards. We talked in cafes of the new vision, the new scale of music, the new architecture — unnecessary things were to be done away with and art was to be functional. How young we were!

Almost everyone one met was expressing genius, inventiveness, dedication to the new vision.

Was it really like this?

The answer to the question lies in the work that I then did. Is it of any value now?’

Looking through the plates of this book, the answer is unquestionably Yes. With the unfaltering Nicholson eye, Andrew, her son, has insisted upon the reproduction of each painting maintaining a high standard of excellence, and it is rare to find an art book with such sensitive, accurate and balanced colour printing. Faber and Faber has produced a volume that could well be advertised as ‘the ideal present for the person who has everything and the person who has nothing.’ In giving this book to a rich man one would be giving him what no amount of money could buy: rainbows and unwitherable
flowers. By giving it to a poor man, one would be giving him the key to his own hidden treasure: the means of perceiving that the jewel colours of rainbow, flowers, sky, grass, have always been his.

Some years ago, in Iran, I saw the Shah’s jewels in their basement stronghold. There the emeralds, rubies and diamonds gleamed from their great gold settings in the electric light with soulless splendour. I emerged from the exhibition having lost all interest in precious stones. In the afternoon of the same day I was taken to see an antique dealer who had in his collection some very ancient, very fragile glass flasks. They had been excavated from the desert sand where they had lain for hundreds of years. Time and the minerals of earth had acted upon their substance in such a way that light no longer poured directly through them, but shimmered and refracted into delicate rainbow colours, like oil on water, the pale celadon green of the glass slightly opaque, as if with the curd of asses’ milk. For me these ancient flasks, not the Shah’s pompous jewels, were the real treasures of Persia, for they held in their fragmented and mended forms the answer to the rainbow’s end, the magic of a hundred thousand nights, and the whiff of vanished jinn. Those flasks, and the autumn crocuses growing out of the dry, cracked sand, below the tombs of Xerxes and Artaxerxes in the desert of Persepolis – innumerable crocuses, so miraculously flowering in their fragile incandescent ultra-violet petals – these were not only visual aesthetic highlights of my visit to Iran, but they seemed mysteriously to symbolize the indestructibility of the soul.

When, some seven years later, at Bankshead, I looked through Winifred’s prism at a water-jug and a half empty pot of marmalade on the table, I saw not a table, water-jug and marmalade-pot, but a shimmering, translucently refracting world in which stood iridescent vessels like the jinn flasks from Persepolis (any former occupants of Winifred’s flasks were spelled with a j, never, teetotaller that she was, with a g). I was astonished, I was amazed.

‘It’s miraculous!’ I cried.

‘Yes’ Winifred replied, putting an extra teaspoon of marmalade that glowed like fire into her mouth, ‘The world is miraculous, but most of the time people don’t see that it is, because they don’t bother to look.’

I told her about the Persian jinn flasks and the crocuses. She too had autumn crocuses at Bankshead, and had already given me two bulbs.

‘That colour – the crocus ultra-violet – isn’t accidental. It does convey the immortality of the soul, not only because it is the highest visible vibration in the spectrum, but because it incises the hot colours in a landscape. The Rajput painters used it to accentuate the sense of heat in their paintings.’

To emphasize her words she was gently waving the marmalade spoon which flashed (I was still looking through the prism) like a magic wand. We then talked of sacred and symbolic colours. I had been involved in painting a series on the Apocalypse, and I told Winifred how astonished and shocked I had been when I had seen Dürer’s illustration of the Strong Angel (Rev.x.1–7).
And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud, and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire.'

Dürer had depicted the angel's legs literally — or as Ben Nicholson would have said literally — as pillars with flames emerging from the top, like a couple of paraffin-wax garden flares.

Winifred knew exactly what that colour was that St John had seen on the angel's face and feet, 'that celestial colour that is nearest on this earth perhaps to amber' (p. 31). She said that maybe Dürer, working in black and white, had been unable to interpret St John's description in anything but a literal way. Then, after a pause, she added that we would never know if Dürer himself had ever seen that colour, and if he had not, he could not possibly know how to interpret it except literally.

Winifred Nicholson is known principally for her paintings of flowers in which she used positive colours which also expressed her positive, Christian Science beliefs. Because of this, and because it is much easier to paint dark, negative powerful pictures, than light, positive powerful pictures, the strength of Winifred's work is often overlooked, and she has occasionally been written and spoken about with some degree of sentimentality and insipidity. One good lady, looking at the painting I am proud to possess ('Tunisian Earth' reproduced on p. 212) breathed ecstatically 'How radiant! How fragrant! I feel I can just imagine her home, filled with the exquisite perfume of flowers.' In fact when I was there, Bankshead was filled with the odour of Winifred's dear old dog, who lay all day roasting himself far too close to the fire. Winifred was not in the least sentimental in herself or in her work, though just very occasionally a touch of whimsey would creep in ('Cheeky Chicks' p. 194). She was extremely discriminating and critical while at the same time being enormously generous to other artists, myself among them.

Turning the pages of Unknown Colour I am struck by how decisively she used her high tones and colours. The favourite English colours of baby blue, face-powder pink, Bisto brown and boiled greens were not hers. By a flick of vermilion she could heat up a passage of pale ochre; she could intensify the light on a white table-cloth by painting over it a shadow tinged with cobalt, then edged with magenta, and finally she could superimpose upon that the reflected light from another object by a hint of cadmium yellow glazed opaquely over a section of the shadow. Her use of warm and cold reflected light and of twice reflected light is, to me, one of the secrets of her extraordinary talent as a painter. The freshness of her brushstrokes, especially of the foreground objects, gives a sense of surprise: a quick thin line of viridian emerging from a small swirl of umber; a spot of bright yellow on top of clear vermiliony terracotta upon opaque grey-tinged white. Her sure brushstrokes give the effect of astonishment at the present presence of the object — flower, jug, twig, mountain-top or cloud. Winifred's pictures are,
each one of them, an acknowledgement of the miraculous existence of each thing.

Her flowers in tissue-paper which she painted in Italy in 1921 are supreme examples of this. Of them she wrote (p. 37):

‘Ben had given me a pot of lilies-of-the-valley – Mugetti – in a tissue-paper wrapper. This I stood on the window-sill – behind was azure blue, Mountain Lake, sky, all there – and the tissue-paper wrapper held the secret of the universe. (picture p. 13). That picture painted itself, and after that the same theme painted itself on that window-sill, in cyclamen, primula, or cineraria – sunlight on leaves, and sunlight shining transparent through lens and through mystery of tissue-paper. I painted every day, and the last day when we had packed and there were no paint-brushes out of suitcases, I had to paint with my fingers. That picture (‘Window-sill, Lugano’) is now in the Tate.’

Although one could say that the majority of Winifred’s paintings were in the major key, because her love of life and beauty and sunlight came out as a whole in that way, when she moved to the minor key her work was just as strong and moving. ‘Candlemass’ (p. 217) and ‘Iris’ (p. 214) reveal a deep mysterious power. And in her wild seascape ‘Isle of Canna’ (p. 203) the brush-strokes move almost frenetically, in black, grey and white, over the canvas sea and sky, and yet there in the foreground is a rounded patch of yellow, the spot of land upon which one could safely stand, and without which one would be helplessly lost in the dark floundering waters. In ‘Boat on a stormy sea’ (p. 82) the waves are rougher, but higher in tone, spurting dry, white strokes as if from a Zen master’s brush, but the hope is there in the soft bluey-green ruching the horizon.

She did not, as is thought of some Christian Scientists, avoid looking at the darkness. She looked into it and saw through it. There was something miraculous about Winifred. She knew things without being told; she knew what one’s deepest needs were without being told, and she knew what one’s deepest needs were going to be.

I have unashamedly used this review to add my own personal reminiscences of Winifred, as a tribute to this dear and good painter and friend. I will therefore conclude by telling of an incident that has just happened.

I have already said that Winifred gave me two autumn crocus bulbs; that was some time in the mid-sixties. For a few years they came up with one or two flowers in my window-box in Chelsea. Then I moved and the bulbs were put in a bank by my studio in the country among the snowdrops and bluebells. For several years big green leaves appeared in the spring, but only once a few pallid flowers emerged in the autumn. This year, three weeks ago, having been asked to write this review, I was thinking deeply about Winifred. I found the small bundle of letters I had from her, and I recollected my
conversations with her, which the reading of Unknown Colour so vividly brought back to me.

In the morning I came downstairs and looked out of my bathroom window. There was a mass of autumn crocuses – thirty huge ones. They were the same that Winifred had given me so many years before, and now they had sprung to life in this miraculous abundance. The very scene before my eyes was that of one of Winifred’s unique pictures, alive.

It had been raining and still large drops were falling from the sky. The early morning sun shone through the trees and illuminated the greeness of the grass. But the colour was intensified and the whole scene before my eyes was electrified by the ultra-violet of the crocuses. The vertical drops of rain were split by the sunlight as they fell into minute rainbow fragments, and over each crocus, separating the ultra-violet from the angel-wing green of the grass was a halo of deep indigo.

Thetis Blacker

Art as Reminder


In this new book Seyyed Hossein Nasr dwells on the different arts which have flowered throughout the centuries in the world of Islam. Chapter by chapter he explains to us in some detail why these arts must be considered as Islamic and not merely as the products of an extra-religious activity. He starts with a general introduction, the gist of which is expressed in the following passage:

‘Only that which comes from the One can lead back to the One. If virgin nature serves as a support for recollection or remembrance of God (dhikr), it is because it was created by the Divine Artisan, one of God’s Names being al-Sānī, literally the Divine Artisan or Maker. In the same way, if Islamic art can serve as support for remembrance of the One, it is because, although made by men, it derives from a supra-individual inspiration and a hikmah which comes ultimately from Him. If the most spiritually gifted among Muslims can fall into spiritual ecstasy through hearing an Arabic or Persian poem, listening to a chant, or contemplating a piece of Arabic calligraphy, it is because of the inner nexus between these forms of art and Islamic spirituality.’
Needless to say, there is a hierarchy to be observed, and the first section of the book is devoted especially to calligraphy and architecture, these being the sacred arts which developed most directly from the Revelation upon which Islam is based. In the chapter entitled 'The Spiritual Message of Islamic Calligraphy' we are reminded that in the very first Quranic verses to be revealed to the Prophet there is mention of the qalam, that is, the calamus by which the Quran's Celestial archetype had been inscribed in Heaven. This mention may be considered as the seed from which the sacred art of calligraphy took its growth. The author dwells on the double aspect of the reed as both calamus and flute: 'The saint has himself become the reed through which the Divine Musician produces the melodies of cosmic existence while he is also the calamus with which God manifests His Actions in His creation. By being in perfect surrender to the Divine Will, the saint becomes himself the pen in the hands of the Divine Artist.' There are three fine colour plates of well chosen pages from Qurans in different scripts, and a fourth showing a floriated Kufic inscription from the Karatay madrasah in Qonya. The chapter ends with a quotation from a profound poem on the symbolism of the letters and ink by the seventeenth century Sufi ʿAbd al-Ghani an-Nabulusi and not, as stated in the text, by the twentieth century Ahmad al-ʿAlawi.

The coming of Islam imposed not only calligraphy but also architecture on the semi-nomadic Arabs to whom the Quran was initially addressed. In both cases this had the advantage of a beginning unencumbered by decadent relics of the past. It is true that calligraphy was to be enhanced by illumination which incorporated elements drawn from pre-Islamic art, and certain features now thought of as being essential to the mosque, in particular the dome, had already become characteristic of Byzantine churches. But the Revelation identifies Islam with the primordial religion, and the chapter on architecture opens with the saying of the Prophet: 'The earth was placed for me as a mosque and a purifier.' The author stresses here the fact that the first mosques of Islam were prolongations of virgin nature. At Medina the Prophet simply enclosed a rectangle of nature, and a small section of it was then roofed for shade; and this prototype is immediately recognizable in some of the subsequent but still early mosques such as that of Kairouan and the Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo which have never been architecturally surpassed, and which are to be glimpsed in two of the plates.

Every sacred building is a meeting of Heaven and earth; and if the floor and the walls of the mosque are its earth, its Heaven lies first of all in its openness to the sky. Another celestial aspect which springs directly from the religion itself is the minaret from which the muezzin makes the call to prayer. The dome, universally one of the great symbols of Heaven, was in the nature of things absorbed into the purely Islamic content of all that we have just mentioned as the culminating point of that part of the courtyard which was
roofed; and it soon took on a variety of exquisite forms in virtue of which it has become more closely associated with Islam than with any other religion. A secondary celestial aspect of the mosque is achieved by the exploitation of light and the various means of catching it. ‘Not only does light define the spaces of Islamic architecture but it also plays a central role in making possible both the use of intensely white structures which reflect the purity of the desert and the levelling of all multiplicity before the One according to Lā ilāh illa Llāh, and the use of intensely coloured edifices which appear as an earthly reflection of paradisal states. If white symbolizes the unity of undifferentiated reality, colours which result from the polarization of light symbolize the manifestation of the One in the many, and the dependence of the many upon the One.

The author dwells on the symbolism of light and its connection with guidance and therefore with the Quran which continually identifies itself with illumination. As to the identity of light with faith, he quotes the saying of the Prophet: ‘A person of faith in a mosque is like the sun reflecting in water.’

Like light, emptiness has a celestial significance while being also, like light, a factor of unification; and although the book has a final chapter on the significance of the void, the author rightly anticipates it by insisting here on the part played by emptiness in mosque architecture and by extension also in the home. ‘The emptiness in the mosque, related at once to spiritual poverty and the sense of the presence of the Spirit, is of course also a result of the emphasis of the Islamic revelation upon the doctrine of Divine Unity… This is to be seen also in interior decoration of not only the mosque but also the home which is its extension. Uncluttered by furniture, with emphasis upon the floor which is kept ritually clean, the interior space of the traditional Muslim house, like that of the mosque, evokes the sense of the sacred through its very emptiness.’

The book’s second section is on literature; and after an opening chapter entitled ‘Metaphysics, Logic and Poetry in the Orient’ we are given a moving and illuminating analysis of one of the greatest Sufi poems, ‘Attār’s Mantiq at-Tayr (the Language of the Birds), an allegorical account of the spiritual path with all its difficulties and dangers. These are overcome for the sake of attaining to the Divine Self which is the ultimate goal of every mystic path and which is symbolized by the Simurgh, a unique all-transcendent bird who lives on the mysterious mountain of Qâf. The birds who go in quest of the Simurgh are the initiates who have set out upon the Sufi way. Many fine passages are quoted throughout the chapter, and the translations, by Seyyed Hossein himself, are good enough to convince us of the surpassing greatness of the poem as a masterpiece of language in addition to being a summit of spiritual instruction. Many readers will regret that they do not know Persian, and some will no doubt be impelled to make good that deficiency. Further sighs will be
sighed for the same reason during the perusal of the excellent chapter on 'Rumi and the Sufi Tradition', which is preceded by a more general and more biographical chapter entitled 'Rumi, Supreme Poet and Sage'. Unlike the quotations from 'Attâr, those from Rumi are given in the original Persian as well as in translation.

The third section of this book is on music. It begins, not unnaturally, with a mention of the call to prayer and the chanting of the Quran. We are also reminded that there is a long standing tradition of military music in Islam; and in addition to the music that has always been connected with Sufism, there is the so called 'folk music' and also the classical traditions of music.' Having shown that this art is no less prevalent throughout the Islamic world than it is in any other traditional civilization, the author raises the question as to why it has always been said in certain quarters that music is legally forbidden in Islam. The answer is that not all music is allowed. 'The very sobriety of Islam prevented music from becoming an externalized profanation'. But 'Islamic civilization has not preserved and developed several great musical traditions in spite of Islam but because of it. It has prevented the creation of a music, like the post-classical music of the West, in which an “expansion” takes place without the previous “contraction” which must of necessity precede expansion in the process of spiritual realization. Islam has banned music which leads to the forgetfulness of God.' The chapter on 'Islam and Music' contains a long quotation from a treatise on music by a Sufi master who is venerated as the patron saint of Shiraz. This is followed by a chapter on 'The Influence of Sufism on Traditional Persian Music'.

The fourth and last section is on the plastic arts. In a chapter on 'The World of Imagination in Persian Miniature Painting' emphasis is placed on the artist’s retention of natural perspective, that is, not making the two-dimensional surface of the canvas appear as if it were three-dimensional. This has the effect of making a distinction between the world that is portrayed and the material world of three dimensions, and this distinction perfectly conforms to the aim of the artist which is, so the author tells us, to represent the higher domain of imagination, the 'imaginal world', in contrast with the world of the body. 'The majority of Persian miniatures depict not a profane world but this intermediary world which stands above the physical and which is the gateway to all higher states of being. Like the “Lesser Mysteries”, which prepare the adept for entrance into the abode of the “Greater Mysteries”, the miniature, along with similar so called “courtly” arts, is a traditional art of the intermediate world in its positive angelic aspect and by virtue of this character has for its subject what we might call the earthly paradise, whose joys and beauties it seeks to recreate.'

In the already mentioned final chapter on the void we are reminded once again of the all important principle of spiritual poverty. 'All Islamic art, of
which Persian art contains some of the most remarkable examples, contains
an affirmation, even through material objects, of the Quranic verse "Allah is
the Rich and ye are the poor (fuqara)". Even the luxurious and ornate art of
Safavid Persia or Umayyad Andalusia is able to realize this "poverty" and to
remain faithful to the principle that the void symbolizes the sacred and the
gate through which the Divine Presence enters into the material order which
encompasses man in his terrestrial journey.' It might be added however in
passing that the two arts mentioned here, those of Umayyad Andalusia and
Safavid Persia stand almost at opposite poles in the domain of Islamic
architecture. The much earlier Western art realizes the poverty in question
more easily and perhaps more profoundly, no doubt because its 'riches' are
more immediately transparent. This digression recalls a remark in the
introduction where, as a typical example of Islamic decorative art at its best,
the portal of the Shah Mosque in Isfahan is mentioned in virtue of its
'incredible geometric and arabesque patterns'. The exquisite beauty of the
portal cannot be denied; but this example is somewhat surprising in its
particular context because during the XVIth century the geometric element
lost all its sharpness. Its angles were rounded, its straight lines curved, and it
ceased to be the true masculine complement of the feminine arabesque. In
other words, Safavid art, by its diminishment of the geometric element, lost
something of that sobriety of rigour or fear which is closely akin to poverty
and emptiness. It must not be forgotten however that the minarets of the
Shah Mosque are fully geometric in their ornamentation. The dome likewise
retains something of the more clearly cut Timurid art, especially in virtue of
its Kufic inscriptions which contrast with those of the portal.

The book ends with a postcript entitled 'The Spiritual Message of Islamic
Art'. This is the summing up of the previous chapters in order to confront the
modern world — and its accomplices — with the true perspective of beauty
which is inseparable from Islam. The destruction of this perspective today in a
multitude of Muslim souls 'has made it possible during the past few decades
for the ugliest manifestations of the modern industrial world to annihilate
with remarkable ease much of the precious Islamic artistic heritage.'

None the less there has been a reaction to these desecrations — all too late,
one may say, but better late than never — on a larger scale than might have
been expected. 'At long last, even in those regions of the Islamic world where
the withering away of Islamic art and culture has been most noticeable, there
is a desire to re-discover Islamic art. Young Muslim architects are again
becoming interested in the principles of Islamic architecture, city planning
and gardening. Some of the crafts have been revived in at least certain
countries. There is an attempt on the part of the few to preserve the classical
traditions of music, and a new wave of interest in the classics of Arabic and
Persian literature is clearly discernible.'

In conclusion we must congratulate Golgonooza Press on its production of
this beautifully printed book with its fine plates, 16 in colour and others in black and white. I confess that I find it something of a trial to have the notes placed at the end of each chapter rather than at the foot of the page, but in this case the notes are so copious that they might have proved too unwieldy as footnotes. The author has drawn on many sources, and one recognizes above all the influence of Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt. There are frequent echoes of their writings in addition to the numerous references and quotations. But this remark must not be taken in any sense as a belittlement of the author's own remarkable originality.

Perhaps the book's most striking feature is that it embraces the whole range of the arts; and if it succeeds so well in doing so, that is because Seyyed Hossein is not concerned with superficial questions which might call for specialization beyond the scope of any single individual. He concentrates here on the spiritual roots which bind each separate art to all the others, and which alone justify their existence and guarantee their perennity.

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Martin Lings

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A True Poet

George Barker's Collected Poems lead directly to the question: what is poetry, and what rôle do we ask the poet to assume in the twentieth century? — I see these as crucial issues arising from his work in its affirmation of the transcendent imagination, its conception of poetry not as a career but as a vocation.

We live at a time when distinctions have vanished and the arbitrary truncations of prose by the determinant of a typewriter are considered the measuring guide for a form of poetics. But the real thing, that is the order imposed by the imagination on its subject material in a radius defined by the precise illuminating arc of a lighthouse beam, so that the discovery is one that both startles and confirms our inner apprehensions, is a force so vital that it is inseparable from the deepest mysteries of the self.

Over a period of half a century George Barker has remained unflinchingly true to his calling, and if the consolation afforded by one's own work is small, then its will to live persists in the lives of others. He is always more than the sum of his calling, indeed it might be said that the good poet dies with his secret intact, and that what he has transmitted are the routes of his journey rather than its ultimate discovery. Poetry is the scarlet thread by which we negotiate the corridors of the labyrinth. The beautiful and moving elegy
written in memory of his father, which takes as its setting Thurgarton Church, is an exercise in compassion, a meditation on death which evokes a poetry, at once timeless and redeemed by its celebration of place.

The rain, the sometime summer rain on a memory of roses will fall lightly and come among them as it erases summers so long ago.

And the voices of those once so much loved will flitter over the nettled rows of graves, and the holly tree twitter like friends they used to know.

And not far away the icy and paralysed stream has found it also, that day the flesh became glass and a dream with nowhere to go.

Like many poets who begin writing poetry at a young age, and continue to publish poetry for a lifetime, there are areas of George Barker's work which have gone unnoticed, meaning that the development and progression of his poetry has still to receive critical notice. The fiercely rhetorical apocalyptic manner which distinguishes his poems right up to The View From a Blind I (1962) becomes rechannelled into a focus trained on the mystery of being, a lyricism that sets out to retrieve a world known in the state of inspired vision, and with an intensity that has the poet and poem become interchangeable, so that each narrows on the other in the attempt to form a single unity. The graph of progression charted by a predominantly elegiac voice during this latter period has given rise to a poetry as inimitably pure as it is magical in the mystic sense of discovering absolutes through a vision that if it is at times flawed or inconsistent is nevertheless wholly true in its intentions. There is dignity too in the elegies written for lost friends, and the note is nowhere more perfectly sounded than in 'Poem as Dedication' from The View From a Blind I (1962).

To those friends, therefore, whom the sea or the wide grave, or time sets on the farthest shores of love where only memory may lift its olive branch to them --- to them, over the wave on whose crowned crest the white new moon.
A TRUE POET

as faithfully as the old
has wreath and chaplet of light strewn
renewal of its love –
to them, over death and division
of what can never be told
I lift the laurelled hand of my affection
and write the word in gold.

Indeed it is the attempt to transcend death and division, to reconstitute through the poem an envisaged paradise that sets George Barker apart from the stream of social realism that has clouded the poetry of the last half century. And anyone who shares such a vision, and is prepared to follow the inner journey as one might an underground stream whose voice is apparent only to one’s ear, knows the courage and resolution involved in undertaking this responsibility. Giving everything there is nothing to fall back on, and in practical terms starvation threatens not as a romantic illusion but as a reality. There is no help offered to the poet who lives outside his age, there is only hopefully the concern of friends who care that such a vision persists. Thus the poem is dependent on the poet in a very real sense, for the latter has to keep alive in order to conceive the former.

In the sequence ‘Dreams Of A Summer Night’ which forms the title poem of the same collection, the mythic thread pursued by the poet culminates in the apocalyptic vision of London in flames and the poet nursing the head of Medusa in his hands.

I was my shadow smiling up from Death Valley and Hypnotized, chanting a paean in praise of destruction,
Death, dereliction, destruction. I was the City of London in flames with, overhead, virgins Plucking their psalteries and saints contemplating their navels.
I was the engines of Justice rusting in the skies of sunset And armies asleep dreaming of peace. I was tempests Gathering in thunderheads over the heart’s red sea and Ah, I was lightning dividing it. Agonized head of Medusa Greater degradations await you, the keys uncrossed and the flaming Gates that prevail as Armageddon uncoils from its sleep And instead of the sun a dragon of hydrogen rises up in the Orient.

There is in all George Baker’s poetry the sense of someone who sees things through a transforming glass, and this is how poetry as distinct from verse comes to be written. It is the transmuted substance, the metamorphosis perceived and arrested in the instant of change which defines the poet’s eye. Without the transformational process words remain grounded and the
imagination is absent. The poet is the creator of what he sees – and the poem a constellation added to the already existing stars placed there by those whose vision came before us. There is a galaxy identifiable to poets, for each radiant star is a poem that provides another island across the deep blue spaces. And are the stars not also a visible map of death.

In the poems collected in the volumes In Memory Of David Archer and Villa Stellar George Barker probes the mystery of the ineffable – the nature of experience, the shared reality of the visible and the invisible and the union of life and death. It is always the moment of knowing of inspiration which is isolated as truth.

The mind flitters and flies over memories like a seabird that fishes its sustenance up from the past. But sometimes this gull dives straight downward into the jaws of the shark. This is when the imagination is seized by an allegorical fact or an inspiration. And the springs of my childhood feed fountains I have not yet even reached, let alone drunk at. I have also visited a country in which innocence was acquired by experience, and in this paradise the wild animal was king, and the child merely a premature Old man ignorant of what he had not yet suffered.

Collected Poems ends appropriately with the long masterfully sustained ‘Anno Domini’ with its impassioned plea for imaginative truth to predominate over a world menaced by nuclear threat, impersonal institutions and the elimination of individual consciousness. The poem is in many ways his masterpiece. It places its absolute trust in an orphic world in which the politician who goes to sleep dreaming of blood wakes up with a rose in his hand.

This is a book full of discoveries – it is the life’s work of a poet and as such should be read by all who live and see by the light of the imagination.

Jeremy Reed

One Foot in Eden


The reader who is to approach the writings of Edwin Muir for the first time – as it might be supposed any reader of this anthology could be – has to reckon with an exceptional circumstance. Muir was born in Orkney in 1887 and grew up in rural surroundings that were largely untouched by the sort of day to day
conditions and pressures that are part and parcel of modern industrial life for
the mass of men and women. He became a writer many years later after
having been plunged into the more prosaic modern world by his family’s
move to Glasgow when he was fourteen years old. The move from the one
life to the other had the effect, as he confessed, of making it seem that when
he arrived in Glasgow he was already 200 years old. Such was the abrupt
transition from the Orcadian idyll to the purgatorial experiences of the
Glasgow slums that, as he related in his Autobiography, ‘when I arrived in
Glasgow straight from Orkney, I had no self-protective apparatus for selecting
my impressions and was stunned by a succession of sights which I frantically
strove not to see. The main problem which puzzled me at that time was how
all these people could live in such places without feeling ashamed.’ (p.148)

It is important for any reader of Muir’s work, especially of his poetry, to
remember this: that Muir’s sensibility and imagination were largely pre-
industrial. The mythic and archetypal themes on which his poetry is built are
for the most part shaped by the formative experiences of his Orkney
childhood which remained for the poet the ‘normal, traditional mode of
existence’. As a commentator upon contemporary life, as Muir was in much
of his prose, it meant that he was able to see the contemporary condition with
a unique freshness and immediacy without the sharpness of his sensibility
having been blunted, or his vision of the moral dilemma of the mass of
working people having been twisted into an expedient acquiescence. Com-
menting on the ‘faith’ in ‘getting-on’ to which the modern worker is more or
less forced by laissez-faire economics and the kind of society it creates Muir
writes with such discerning simplicity, directness and detachment (as if he
were describing a dream; a quality that often informs his prose) as could only
come from a mind freshly confronted with the full development, with no
intermediate stages, of conditions so inimical to the normal spiritual well-
being of man’s nature: ‘if one mentioned the moral ideal of Socialism to them
[the “strivers” after the modest wealth of respectability] they would reply that
economics had nothing to do with morality, and alternatively or simul-
taneously that Socialism was immoral, since it did not strengthen the
character. The truth is, all economic theories, however stripped of moral
assumptions, accrete a whole body of moral prejudices and emotions round
them in the course of their existence. The laissez-faire economists could
separate economics and morality with the most satisfactory neatness, but the
actual people who by their labour maintained the system based on laissez-faire
could not achieve the feat, since they were moral beings. So they had either to
give laissez-faire a high ethical sanction, or else regard it as evil, like the
trade-unionists and Socialists that I came to know later.’ (p.151–2)

The original title of Muir’s autobiography was The Story and the Fable, a title
intended to point up the distinction that Muir always made that the Story, that
is the narrative of the contraptions of history, is unreal in comparison with the
Fable which is rooted in that greater thing, to quote from George Mackay Brown's introduction, 'the deep sub-conscious treasury of the race'. (p. 3) The Story, that falsification which is merely an historical account, must be judged against the Fable, which for Muir was the archetypal form of the imagination that helps us to shape and so understand what would otherwise be a congeries of meaningless and countless unrelated experiences.

Something of how this affected his poetry can be seen, for instance, from Muir's own account of his poem Ballad of Hector in Hades in which the poet describes having got rid of the terror of almost thirty years previously when he had run away from a fight with another boy near his island home on Wyre. The poem is told as if it were the chase of Hector by Achilles round the wall of Troy. In his characteristic style Muir builds the narrative, put into Hector's mouth, not around the majestic Homeric theme but by way of a concentrated and intense observation of the minute details of the scene which, but for Muir's ability to transform them with poetic intensity, would remain as merely incidental facts.

The grasses puff a little dust
where my footsteps fall,
I cast a shadow as I pass
The little wayside wall.

The strip of grass on either hand
Sparkles in the light
I only see that little space
To the left and to the right.

And in that space our shadows run,
His shadow there and mine,
The little knolls, the tossing weeds,
The grasses frail and fine.

All I have quoted so far has come from the chapters 'Wyre' from the poet's An Autobiography (1954), and 'Glasgow' from Scottish Journey (1935). The reader is entitled to a measure of discontent that something like a third of the present book is taken up with sections of An Autobiography which has recently been republished complete as a paperback (Hogarth Press £5.95) at one third of the price of the present volume. That complaint aside, it has to be said that George Mackay Brown has chosen wisely and sensitively from Muir's prose so that the collection serves admirably to open up the whole range of Muir's concerns, as a poet, a commentator on his age and as a literary critic of originality and distinction. The chapters already quoted from will direct the reader to the main currents of sensibility that run on into and largely shape the contours of his poetry. In the extracts from 'Dresden and Hellerau' from
An *Autobiography* the poet describes in a mixture of disarming simplicity and wise humility his beginnings as a poet.

In the section that draws from Muir's critical writings - both early and late - can be found his brilliant 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads' which shows his remarkable empathy and understanding of the Ballad literature he had, of course, known since childhood. The chapter on Spengler taken from *Essays on Literature and Society* (1965) provides the opportunity for Muir to explain his attitude towards the inadequacy of a purely historical account of man's nature and existence. For Muir the religious view of life, 'the old traditional view of life', in which man is 'an immortal soul, whose essence could never be seized and contained by history' (p. 60) is also that of the artist. 'History is the record of human limitation' whereas Religion 'accepts the totality of human desire, disappointment and fulfilment' and represents man as the actor in the historical drama, 'a drama of sin and atonement, aspiration and failure, which implied a responsibility to something beyond time'. (p. 60)

In the chapter 'Poetry and the Poet' from *The Estate of Poetry* (1962) Muir deals with the forms in which poetry is embodied, and the imaginative spirit that informs the many modes of poetry. As a means of balancing the 'exact knowledge' of the sciences (a balance that has been increasingly lost over the last three centuries) imaginative knowledge or vision is indispensable for human life since it gives men and women a heightened sense of the need for meaning, of good and evil, of social conscience by which they may come to know who they are and the purpose of their existence.

There is nothing from Muir's three novels; *The Marionette* (1927) has recently been republished in paperback by Hogarth Press (£5.95) but the editor has included the chapter 'The Dramatic Novel' from *The Structure of the Novel* (1928) as well as a study of Virginia Woolf from *Transition* (1926) in both of which Muir shows himself to be an astute and diligent critic of human mores and their representation at the hands of many of the major English novelists. It seems a pity that room could not have been found for more than the three letters from among the 135 contained in his *Selected Letters* (1974), interesting though these three are.

The editor, who was a student of Muir's at Newbattle Abbey College in the early '50s has not only provided a loving memoir of this period in the form of an envoi to the anthology, but also introduces his selection with a brief but quietly pointed introduction. The anthology represents a balanced and thoroughly reliable introduction to the whole of Muir's work and thought and those who are approaching him for the first time may rest assured that there are lasting riches beyond this selection still to be discovered.

Brian Keeble
Poetry and Magick

In the Hall of the Saurians. (New Poems) by Peter Redgrove. Secker & Warburg. £5. 54 pp.
The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense by Peter Redgrove. Bloomsbury. 217 pp. £13.95.

Peter Redgrove is one of the few significant poets now writing and from first to last in his style and his material he has (to quote the dust-jacket of The Moon Disposes) ‘found ways of describing the natural world and the human conditions that are both unusually accurate and irresistibly strange’. This is true, but ‘ways of describing’ is only the most superficial aspect of a more fundamental change Peter Redgrove has wrought in the current way of seeing and knowing and understanding the world – something more like a revolutionary subversion of mental habits than ‘a new way of describing’. His ‘means’ are indeed brilliant and delightful. He sees nature rather as an energy than as an object and notices the formations and transformations of great clouds and minute insects, the disgusting corruption of death, the renewal of generation, the total alchemy of the natural world, as one thing in this living cosmos. The deus absconditus (‘father’) shows himself in strange guises and ‘mother nature’ breeds with equanimity flies and wasps, spiders, piglets, corn and apples and trees, and whatever else the eye may fall upon. His poetry neither exalts nor rejects anything whatever in this cosmic metamorphosis. It is celebratory poetry. Yet the fact that he started life as a scientist is apparent in his uniform detachment, with no value judgements or empathy, the objectivity rather of a recording needle than a recording angel. Yet his way of seeing and understanding nature is at the farthest remove from mechanistic materialism. The cosmos is for him an unending life-cycle – a cycle of life in its endless shape-shifting from rock to water, cloud, vegetation, maggots, humans insofar as they are themselves a part of his natural cycle. He makes no distinction between one ‘kingdom’ and another. His cosmos is less a multiplicity of beings (or forms) than an alembic, a process or energy in which the reader is immersed, bathed, purged, transmuted. It is more than time that the ‘nature-poetry’ of three centuries of a mechanistic science were thus banished in a new vision (or old vision renewed) of the deus absconditus at work in ‘the lowest effects’ as in ‘the highest causes’. I see Peter Redgrove as a salutary poet, very different from Ted Hughes or Sylvia Plath with whom some reviewer has compared him. Such a comparison is superficial, and he is not a superficial poet.

Technically he is a poet essentially of brilliant and unexpected images, and
his language, like these, is drawn from the high and the low, the singular or the commonplace word, by whose means he works his unitive alchemy. He shocks and exhilarates us, like a rough sea on a cold morning swim.

Having said these things I would make reservations. There is a monotony, not indeed of imagery, which is rich and varied, but of mood. After a while the imagery ceases to surprise us. There is no music, or what there is is of an unvarying tempo and nearly always forte. There is a lack of that rich variety of moods and responses which belongs to the human kingdom. His world is more than mechanism but less than human. There is no sense of inner worlds, or of those paradises of the mind from which Shelley or the other Romantic poets build ‘houses and gardens and fields’ for the soul to inhabit. All is alive yet there is no soul. There is physiological gusto in eating and being eaten, in orgasm and parturition, and the energy of the elemental process, but very seldom human joy, or love; sex is a sort of blissful and zestful physiology. Is Peter Redgrove’s unus mundus the whole or only one aspect or part of that whole to which we as humanity belong? The metamorphoses of our dead, be it into pearls and coral, or into maggot and spider, fly, apples and apple-tree, do not suffice as an answer to our human mystery. Beings cannot exclude a transcendent dimension. It is not apparent that Peter Redgrove’s teeming democracy of nature has any place for hierarchy of beings. His sea-changes of the dead whose thoughts and moods and loves and hates in all their richness endeared them to us into apples and so on, does nothing to define or to present us with their human uniqueness. Few will derive comfort from being told that their dead are now apples (they might equally be wasps or hedgehogs) and indeed these things we have long known on Ilkley Moor bar t’at. What is humanity, or wasp-ness, or apple-ness for that matter? ‘For form is soul and doth the body make’. His cosmology leaves out too much.

Yet his work is a salutary purgation of the scientifically-oriented Western consciousness. Peter Redgrove’s ‘Weddings at Nether Power’s’ are long overdue.

Sometimes indeed a note of human tenderness creeps in, usually in relation to mother or child and for a fleeting moment human lineaments appear, to vanish again; the more moving for their rareness; as in the poem ‘The Funeral’:

The other thing the funeral showed me, unpromising seance,
My Mother, subject of it, at the door ajar
On the field of light, looking back over her shoulder,
Smiling happiness and blessing me, the coherent veil
Of the radiant field humming with bees that lapped the water, and she went

And washed her tired face away with dew and became a spirit.

The Moon Disposes is a good selection – I find in it a number of poems I had long
admired—although from so prolific a poet doubtless other selections equally
good might have been made. In the Hall of the Saurians is as good as any of this
poet’s earlier volumes. He never disappoints.

The Black Goddess is a work of imaginative and speculative scholarship and the
fruit of many years of thought, reading, research, and psychological practice.
It is a courageous book, addressing itself in a radical manner to one of the
many maladies of this time. Blake wrote ‘Body is that portion of Soul
perceived by the Five Senses’. Blake’s phrase might serve as a summary of
Peter Redgrove’s thesis, for to him the body is a living organ of sensuous
experience, a boundlessly rich universe. Blake also said that man’s return to
Paradise would come about through ‘an improvement of sensual enjoyment’
as a result of which the world would appear as it is, ‘infinite and holy’. Blake
said many subversive things of this kind, which have already been produced
as a justification for the drug-cult, following Aldous Huxley’s The Doors of
Perception. But Peter Redgrove understands Blake more simply and radically
—he meant sexual enjoyment, sex being the chief means by which sensual
enjoyment is known. He confronts the issue of this time—sex has never been
so much in the news, and never perhaps been so totally bereft of any
dimension of culture, not to say of any spiritual dimension. A deepening of
the understanding and the practise of sex—every man’s and woman’s
birthright and yet condemned and feared by the Christian religion (as Blake
also noted—‘the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys’) which Peter Redgrove
does not much like at all. An improvement of sensual enjoyment could, he
believes, improve the quality of life in our present society. Blake and Peter
Redgrove are right insofar as Christianity is and has been throughout most of
its long history, a dualistic religion, condemning and outlawing ‘sensual
enjoyment’ and regarding the sole justification and function of sex as
procreation. Sex, Redgrove believes (and we all know it to be so) can be a
means of insight and understanding of many kinds, not excluding spiritual
understanding. This in Indian civilization is perfectly understood, but in our
own world, current permissiveness and promiscuity notwithstanding, is not.
Western attitudes to sex are crude and elementary at best, and ‘everyman’
(and everywoman) in consequence undeveloped and deprived in the sens-
uous aspects of life. Asceticism in some contexts can have great value but
least of all in a society where sex itself is uncultured and undervalued.

Jung also—and Peter Redgrove is a practising psychotherapist taught by
John Layard, an early follower of C.G. Jung—has made similar criticisms of
Christianity. In a work by Murray Stein entitled Jung’s Treatment of Christianity
(the word ‘treatment’ can be read in both senses) Jung traces the present
Western crisis, in which that religion—and our very survival itself—is menaced
by an atheist materialism, to the bias within Christendom from the outset
against nature, and therefore against woman, and our bodily selves as we are
in this life. Unlike Peter Redgrove, Jung would have liked to remedy the
shortcomings and deviations within what is after all our Western spiritual tradition. An atheist science, Jung believed, became inevitable through the split and conflict between 'nature' and 'spirit' which in practise has characterized Christianity. A dualistic cosmos of heaven and hell, good and evil, nature and spirit, Christ and Antichrist was not acceptable to Blake either, who also proclaimed a 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell' and we seem to have outgrown that simplistic dualism. Jung saw signs of hope for Christendom itself in the proclamation of the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which raised the status of woman, and was itself an outcome of a pressure from within the Church itself; for woman is the mother of bodily life, she is nature, she is kind to all her children, the just and the unjust alike. She is the passive all-receiving yin (to use the Chinese symbol) which holds in balance the male, spiritually active yang principle. In India every god has his shakti who gives form to the particular energy represented by that god. An all-male Trinity does not correspond to the universal nature of things.

Father, mother, child, a daughter or a son
That's how all the natural and supernatural stories run.

Peter Redgrove, with his wife Penelope Shuttle, has already confronted the issue in an earlier book, The Wise Wound, on sexuality and the menstrual cycle of woman. The Black Goddess takes the issue farther, written with serious intent to make a contribution towards the restoring of the wholeness other religious traditions have better understood. The strength of secular materialism, which in many parts of the world has prevailed over Christianity lies (so writes Ramchandra Gandhi, the Indian advaita (non-dualistic) philosopher, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi) owes its strength to its 'non-dualistic' character; a sinister caricature of the true wholeness of the cosmos in which matter and spirit, nature and the over-living Self, are indivisibly one. In the alchemical tradition of the deus absconditus, hidden in matter, to be released in the 'great work' of the alchemist, the West does possess an alternative view of matter, to which Jung and others have pointed. Peter Redgrove is deeply versed in Western esoteric studies, and his premises are those of that excluded tradition — a way that Goethe himself saw that our study of nature might have taken and to which it must perhaps return.

The Black Goddess — who includes many — more than two hundred — 'black Madonnas', highly miraculous in their powers, according to Catholic tradition itself — represents, according to Peter Redgrove, a world, a wealth, of subliminal or excluded sensory messages that play upon us continually from the cosmos, but of which we are normally ignorant. Or 'ignore-ant' as he says since we deliberately ignore, with our acutely focused rational minds, the colours, scents, sounds, smells, the myriad messages the cosmos continually plays upon us. The scent of the dog, the eyes of the bee, the 'radar' sense of the bat and insect, the receptivity (even to fish) of 'pheromones' — scent stimuli —
constitute worlds unknown to us and infinitely rich in information human senses do not register. The skin too is an organ of perception of whose potential we are scarcely aware. It is this ‘dark’ all-embracing life which sustains us that we ignore. The ‘goddess’, Peter Redgrove believes, is infinitely kind to us, nature ‘red in tooth and claw’ being less real than her all-sustaining nurturing of her creatures. Through woman – the dark womb of mother and bride – we receive intimations from that greater ‘mother nature’ in whose womb we are at all times, Hopkins’s ‘womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night’. The ‘onlooker’ mind of waking consciousness seeks to ‘observe’ a world in which we participate and live. Redgrove writes with wide scientific knowledge, of the present state of biological studies in particular, but also with passion and eloquence of ‘the fallen daughter’; who is also the sphinx, so he argues, whose riddle poor Oedipus (through ignorance) failed to solve, for the sphinx is her own riddle. Such is the feminine principle of the cosmos, with her rich universe experienced not by the active waking mind but received in darkness, in receptivity, sleep, sex, when we open ourselves to the universe in a sense far other than that known to the observant dissecting mind which knows nothing of knowledge through participation. ‘Noire est pourtant lumineuse’ Baudelaire wrote (whose mistress was black). Redgrove cites Novalis, Coleridge (who so loved the moon), Traherne, Valéry, Rilke. He might have found even nearer to hand another poet influenced strongly by Jung, Edwin Muir, who wrote:

The night, the night alone is old  
And showed me only what I knew,  
Knew, yet never had been told:  
A speech that from the darkness grew,  
Too deep for daily tongues to say...

Having said much in favour of this book I must make reservations. The bibliography is extensive, but of varied value – including for example that outrageous and ‘hyped’ best-seller Holy Blood and the Holy Shroud which was popular, the author argues, because people wanted a union between Jesus and Mary Magdalene! In the later sections the author goes what some might describe as ‘overboard’ into the world of sex-magic. Doubtless these practices he hints at or describes can open to some a cosmic experience which, if ecstasy were the highest human value, would be their justification. But this we must surely question or drug-addicts would be our spiritual teachers. If Heironymous Bosch’s ‘Adamite’ Garden of Sensual Delights were the supreme human experience – those frail sensitive bodies self-absorbed in uterine bliss – then doubtless sex-`magick’ would be the religion of the future. But no civilization has ever held this to be so. It is as if the author, on the Cabbalistic Tree of God, had explored the world of Yesod (‘the machinery of the Universe’) without any glimpse of the higher worlds of the human and
sacrificial Tiphereth, or the transcendent spheres of the angels. His is, when all is said, a reductionist world that dissolves the human back into the pre-human world of ‘nature’ – Mozart’s Queen of Night. Whereas Peter Redgrove understands and describes wonderfully well that which we as humanity share with the lower kingdoms of nature – animal and tree, the four elements and the stars – and this applies equally to his poems – he has a very limited sense of that which makes us not a new species but a new ‘kingdom’. ‘Science can bring us to God better than religion’ he several times writes; a statement which limits our experience to the phenomenal world, albeit a world experienced more fully – more colours, scents, sounds and so forth – than we can now experience. More sensations. But he entirely omits to consider those innumerable and subtle thoughts, apprehensions of meaning and value and beauty, that characterise the human kingdom. To possess the olfactory range of the dog, the visual gifts of bee and owl, the radar of bat and whatever other powers might enable us to pick up even finer messages from the cosmos would not make us more human. And what have the moral virtues of temperance, fortitude, prudence and magnanimity to do with pheromones, or mercy, pity, peace and love, or faith, hope and charity, or, more inclusively dharma (right conduct)? Our capacity for subtleties of values and meanings far transcends anything we might have lost in acuity of senses in which the animal world may surpass us. Or music – surely it is not in its sensation as sound but as its meaning in quite other terms than sensation that music’s value to us resides. At Tiphereth (to return to the symbol of the Tree) the element of ‘sacrifice’ enters as the divine higher life ‘descends’ to the human. Above Tiphereth lie worlds ‘invisible’ in quite another sense than colours are invisible to the human retina.

Up to a point, therefore, and only up to a point, can we assent to this book from the standpoint of those values for which Temenos stands; the nature of the Imagination, and of the sacred. Too much is left out. Peter Redgrove is clearly compassionately concerned to restore ‘wholeness’ to our divided humanity, but the wholeness of ‘nature’ is not enough. If Christianity has erred in excluding nature from the spiritual order, no less does Peter Redgrove’s myrrh-scented world of the Black Goddess exclude a transcendent order. In seeking to restore the dark world of night, he has too much excluded the azure world of the angelic orders. I believe that it is elsewhere – to advaita Vedanta perhaps – that we must look for that wholeness Jung also sought to restore to our suffering, ignorant (and ignore-ant) civilization.

Kathleen Raine
The role of light


This is a book which encourages reflection not only on Italian painting of the Tre- and Quattrocento, but also on the development of Western art after the Renaissance. Vasari considered the past, with the exception of the classical world, as 'barbaric', and his generation sought the return of the Golden Age and a society inspired by heroic idealism. When reading Mr Hills's study one is made deeply aware of the interpretation of light across the centuries and the chasm that exists between Dante's generation rooted in metaphysics and Monet's dependent on the discoveries of science.

The creative and imaginary worlds are grounded in how a generation views the rôles of light and the space made known by luminosity. The intellectual grade through which light is known determines the world seen. Today, it is the fascinating inventions of artificial light which attract attention. Few consider or are prepared to hold in the mind the vase of flowers on the window shelf, rushing from one image to the next, be it on a video screen or through a car window travelling at speed. An image is rarely held, it vanishes without even the impact of a dream.

Renaissance scholars too easily ignore the rôle of light in paintings in order to give emphasis to the mathematical concepts which enabled Brunelleschi, Masaccio and Alberti to propagate their theories of linear perspective. It is enough to look at the architecture, paintings and theories to know that light was not lost for mathematical puzzles. Scholars rediscover the role of light once the theatrical world of the Baroque is considered, especially the tenebrous canvases of Caravaggio. In general, the change brought to our 'world image' by these new concepts of light and space is ignored, and there is an academic thrust towards a progressive view of history, from the barbaric 'dark ages' to the utopia of modernism. The dialogue with the created order as to be known in Dante's Comedy loses its importance for the wilful domination of environment and the gradual demise of nature. From Dante's view, the new order of intellect sought to capture the external world in a box and subject it to systems and theories. Is not the video world of today the reduction to absurdity of Renaissance pictorial theories?

To study the painting of the Renaissance is to observe how the creative mind became more and more fascinated with the external worlds, from the drawings of Leonardo and the perspective sets of Piero to the passions of the soul caught in the gestures and poses of Mannerist and Baroque imagery. From a Blakean point of view, the eye directed by the mind ordering its glance became increasingly charmed by sensuous delights. It is easy to trace the path from Alberti to Monet, even to Cézanne and Seurat, and beyond.
When that decadent spirit of the symbolist world named 'Surrealism' reared its head, the ancient vocabulary of images had been lost.

An image is made known by the quality of light that reveals it within its surrounding space. If I use the word 'icon', I cannot limit it here to Byzantine aesthetics, but use it to embrace also the Italian Primitives and the art of the Gothic north. I use the word to signify the imaginative worlds of the spirit, be they made known in stained glass, illuminated manuscripts or a tempera panel.

The focal point of an icon has little to do with the external eye and its manifold possibilities, though it does not ignore them. Its centre is the intensity of the heart, or seat of consciousness. The light of an icon emanates through the dialogue of the heart with the presence suggested through the skills of the artist-craftsman. The icon does not stimulate exclusively the rational or passionate faculties of the mind, drawing the glance to outward attractions, rather it evokes prayer. Its light and space is inward; its domain is the inward journey of the spirit. On the other hand, Renaissance art will amaze us, perhaps by Mantegna's soldier in ornamental armour or Michelangelo's rendering of awe at the Last Judgement. Renaissance art gradually forgets to prompt the heart to prayer, rarely are its understandings of the role of light concerned with Dante's transumanar, the transfiguration of the created order in the light of Christ. There are exceptions such as Giovanni Bellini (no doubt influenced by Franciscan piety), artists who are still aware of the light with which light may be seen. Something of Bellini was handed on to Giorgione and Titian, and it was not totally lost in the 'illuminismo' of Tintoretto, a devout son of the Church.

At this point, it is all too easy and naive to conclude that orthodoxy holds the truth and all the rest of degeneracy. Admittedly, the destiny of western art was to throw up all the devils ... and the angels ... of consciousness in the highways and byways of pictorial art. Often the spectacle is so enthralling that it is difficult to stand back and assess impartially the contents of the imagery.

I think Mr Hill's book offers a measuring stick, that is, the significance of light within a painting. Much of later western art resulted from technical bravura and the impact of the rediscovery of the theatre. At its best, such art may be good fun, or at its worst, it may become laden with morbidity and the desire to simply shock the viewer. However, the deeper meanings of light are not totally lost. Take one example, Vermeer's Girl pouring milk from a jug. To have seen the original (rather than a reproduction) is to have recognized an archetypal act caught in the intensity of light and optical perception. No doubt, the average art historian will here dismiss any anagogical levels of interpretation, dwelling merely on the facetious nature of 17th Century Dutch genre painting. But surely, here, for those with the eyes to see is the role of light caught up with the sacramental sacredness of the everyday, possibly resulting from the pietistic tradition which flourished in the Low Countries.
An artist's use of light indicates where his heart is, even in the 'post-icon' age. If there is light in the artist's heart, its measure will be revealed in his work.

When studying this book, the reader quickly acknowledges that such insight must come from the hand that has not only held a pen but also a brush. Mr Hills is a lecturer at Warwick University, he is also a gifted painter belonging to a small nucleus of artists in the Midlands concerned with the perennial role of light, Edmund Fairfax-Lucy and Christopher Couch perhaps being the best known of the group.

If any of these thoughts ring true in the reader's mind, let him, or her, take up Mr Hills's book and study the rôle of light in the Italian Primitives, as well as Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, Duccio, Simone Martini, Lorenzetti, Gentile da Fabriano and others. This is a book that encourages us to look afresh at a high-point of western art, it also provokes much wider speculative thought. The evangelical doctrine concerning the nature of light never seems to be too far from its pages.

John Allitt

God as Artist


Edited by Joseph Fessio, S. J. and John Riches. Published in the United States by Ignatius Press.

Probably the greatest living Roman Catholic theologian, and an increasingly influential one, Hans Urs von Balthasar has for many years been striving to reawaken the philosophia perennis. Many small works of his have been published recently in America by Ignatius Press, but these three big volumes mark the first appearance in English of one of his masterpieces, the seven-volume Herrlichkeit. Von Balthasar's intention is to restore the mystical, feminine and 'Platonic' dimension to Catholic theology, to integrate the esoteric once more with the exoteric, and to reconcile the theologian with the artist. It will take more than one man to heal the split between intellect and Imagination in the soul of the West, but even one man can mark a turning point in history. One man - but also one woman, for von Balthasar's work cannot be separated from that of Adrienne von Speyr, to whom he attributes much of his
inspiration. The two of them together experienced the supernatural at first hand, and it is these personal experiences that give their work such authenticity.

Herrlichkeit is not theology, but a theological aesthetics. Von Balthasar points out that of the three Christian-Platonic ‘transcendentals’, the True, the Good and the Beautiful, it is God the Beautiful who has been most neglected in recent centuries. With the rise of the machine, it is logic and ethics that have come to dominate theology. Perhaps this is not unconnected with the decline of the arts, as the medieval synthesis lost its hold on an increasingly fragmented culture. The Masters of the Machine left to the poets the vision of glory, and those poets who remained visionaries found no way to sway the Machine from its course of destruction. Our civilization has put out its own eyes. In Herrlichkeit we find a miracle: we find a God who restores sight to the blind.

If the creation and redemption of the world are an artistic process, because determined by the beauty of God, then we will never understand the world unless we come to share in the vision of the Artist. Without this, the world becomes a mere heap of facts ‘which no longer say anything’, lacking any harmonious form or depth. The first volume under review is called Seeing the Form: it concerns the acquisition of new eyes from the Spirit of God. These new eyes, or rather this single new Eye opened in the heart of man, is a light which shines in us as God’s own witness. One name for this faculty is faith, not ‘blind faith’ but faith as gnosis. It is the inner dimension of faith, often never discovered by those who adhere merely to the externals of religion. It is the esoteric, the dark knowledge of inaccessible light, represented by the Virgin Mary and mediated by the ‘beloved disciple’ who took her into his home after the Crucifixion, John the Divine. Through faith we become capable of ‘seeing the form’. And it is not only the sense of sight that is transformed. From Mary who bore Christ in her flesh we receive new uses for all our bodily senses. ‘For our senses, together with images and thoughts, must die with Christ and descend to the underworld in order then to rise unto the Father in an unspeakable manner which is both sensory and suprasensory’ (p. 425).

The second volume, Clerical Styles, opens with an epigraph from Francis Thompson: ‘The Church, which was once the mother of poets no less than of saints, during the last two centuries has relinquished to aliens the chief glories of poetry… What you theoretically know vividly realize: that with many the religion of beauty must always be a passion and a power, that it is only evil when divorced from the worship of the Primal Beauty.’ Volume One had been a kind of ‘introduction’ to von Balthasar’s task, which here begins with a close examination of five of the most historically important ‘official’ theologians of the Catholic tradition: Irenaeus, Augustine, Denys (Pseudo-Dionysius), Anselm and Bonaventure. Each of them had been marked by the vision of the glory, and their theologies crystallized around it. Except for Irenaeus, each of them had assimilated the riches of Neoplatonism. The third
volume, *Lay Styles*, continues the sequence by examining the 'unofficial' theologians, many of them poets, who have kept the vision alive right up to the modern age: Dante, St John of the Cross, Pascal, Hamann (a Protestant), Soloviev (Orthodox), Hopkins and Péguy.

Von Balthasar does not lecture the artist on the nature of art. He is a theologian, not an art critic. But his concern is the relationship of form to content, a theme which takes him to the heart of the enterprise of art. In any masterpiece, 'content does not lie behind the form, but within it'. Form or expression unites itself with content or essence, inscape with instress, freedom with necessity. 'Visible form not only "points" to an invisible, unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it.' Von Balthasar places this basic principle of aesthetics at the centre of his theology, for the entire cosmos is a theophany, a masterpiece of God the Artist, expressing his nature as Supreme Beauty.

In order to vindicate his vision, von Balthasar must face the reality of suffering and evil. At the centre of Christianity he finds the crucified Man of Sorrows, 'in whom there is no beauty' (Isaiah). Is not Christianity, then, the least aesthetic of religions? Non-Christians are often repelled by the image of atrocity that Catholics place at the centre of their worship. Would it not be better to rise above such things to the Intelligible Realm, where cruelty does not exist? But for von Balthasar, it is in the ugliness of the Cross that God's supreme artistry is finally proven, once the eyes of faith have revealed the man on the Cross as the shining-forth of the Artist himself at the heart of creation. The obedience of Jesus to his calling is the obedience of artist to inspiration, and at the same time it is the submission of content to form, in order to perfect the work of art from within. In von Balthasar's doctrine of apocatastasis, even the depths of hell are brought within the reach of God's mercy. We can no longer say the world would have been more beautiful without suffering, because it is only through suffering that love has manifested its full glory. The world is not loved by God because it is beautiful: it is beautiful because God loves it. The same applies to us: the artist who does not love, cannot create beauty.

"Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past – whether he admits it or not – can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love" (Seeing the Form, p. 18).
Passage to India

150 rupees. 294 pp.

'India is a state of mind' – these words were said to me by the distinguished Indian novelist and philosopher Raja Rao; 'it is in everyone who can attain it'. A similar view is implicit in Dr Drew's book on India and the Romantic Imagination. 'India', he argues, is a name that in the West stands precisely for imaginative truth, truths of the spirit, as against material fact which has for so long determined the bias of our civilization. This theme he approaches from two standpoints: what, for the West, has India signified? And to what degree does the 'India' of the Western imagination correspond to the reality of Indian civilization itself? His detailed examination of this theme ranges from the time of Pythagoras, Apollonius of Tyana, Alexander the Great, Plotinus and his school, to Sir William Jones and the English Romantic poets, Coleridge and Shelley in particular.

His documentation is exhaustive and as a reference book for scholars will be of great value. For the general reader (in the West that is) the discourse is perhaps too fine-spun. Indeed much of the book has the laboured redundancy of the doctorate thesis. Yet to those to whom obscure names of late Hellenistic writers or Ethiopic codices or Indian studies of the late eighteenth century open rather than close doors of the mind, such material will prove most fascinating of all. I think in particular of the way in which the encounter of world-conquering Alexander with the Brahmins who desired no conquest but that over themselves has woven its way into legend from the Greeks themselves, Ethiopia, Islam and Christianity, constructing each their own moral fable from a fact of history. According to some, Alexander himself renounced world-conquest to withdraw into a life of search for spiritual enlightenment – a legend that itself represents the realization that we must all come to that in the end!

Again and again the question arises, did Pythagoras, did Apollonius of Tyana, did Plotinus himself, visit India? Had Socrates been visited by Brahmins? On these historic questions there can be no final certainty but in several instances Dr Drew concludes probability. In general, the teachings of Pythagoras, Plotinus and Apollonius do correspond to teachings native to India, and the argument for India rather than Egypt as the source of the school of Pythagoras is particularly interesting. All have agreed in regarding India as the seat of an unique spiritual wisdom. Even the Christians (who admired the Brahmins for their asceticism) tried to dodge their own theological traps by supposing the Indians to be the descendants of the unfallen Enoch, who had survived the Flood.

Whether or not Plotinus was directly familiar with Indian thought, it has been through Neoplatonism that Indian thought has been assimilated by the
modern West – that underground current which, despite Christian dualism and monopolistic religious claims, has continued to nourish the arts of Europe. With European imperialism the legendary land was to become known to soldiers and traders and shopkeepers; but at the end of the eighteenth century Sir William Jones (under the Governorship of Warren Hastings) and his distinguished circle of scholars and translators revealed a world of intellectual wealth more fabulous than the treasures which attracted commercial greed. In 1785 Wilkins's translation of the Bhagavad Geeta was published, celebrated by Blake in a painting, 'Mr Wilkin translating the Bhagavad Geeta', now lost. It was through that illustrious circle of scholars and translators that India entered the mainstream of English Romantic poetry. Coleridge, hampered imaginatively as he was through his Christian theological commitment, reacted strongly against both Neoplatonic and Indian thought, yet Kubla Khan was itself, if not directly influenced by, at least strangely akin to Tantrism, both Buddhist and Hindu, and the very landscape of Kashmir that surrounded the kingdom of Kubla Khan. (But of that inexhaustible poem what parallels with archetypes of the imagination cannot be drawn?) Shelley, uninhibited by a Christian conscience, moved freely in 'the atmosphere of human thought', Platonic, Neoplatonic and Indian alike. A detailed chapter on the Indian sources of 'Prometheus Unbound' takes note of many really very silly sentimental works: The Missionary (a novel) and Southey's The Curse of Kehama and the like, read by Shelley whose genius nevertheless penetrated to the heart of the matter.

From an Indian standpoint spiritual truth is (paradoxically) a universal and not an uniquely Indian prerogative. Yet it remains true that the Perennial Philosophy is and always has been best understood in India, and has spread from that source both to the Far East (Buddhism) and to the West. Precisely its universality is its uniqueness. Therefore it is as if the very name of 'India' can serve, in poets of genius like Coleridge and Shelley to activate that universal archetype.

Yeats who most recently and most fully committed himself to learning from India, is not included in this book. Instead, the introductory chapter (and one of the best) is on E. M. Forster's novel A Passage to India which draws, Dr Drew interestingly demonstrates, not so much on Indian works as on Plotinus; thus again bringing the Indian theme full circle. The subtlety with which Dr Drew addresses and understands his material suggests that he has himself made his 'passage to India'. Is the West at last ready to learn the universal teachings from India's abundant sacred source?
Three Novels


Orian deals with the life and spiritual quest of a highly gifted but directionless boy who grows into a questing and unresting young man in search of esoteric truth. His quest ranges from East to West, through many meridians of spirituality and discipline in order to discover their essential similarity. He also finds the truth that while 'religious rites and discipline can shorten the quest for divine knowledge', there comes a point beyond which the snowline recedes and all mystics sit down together and eat. This journey is neither conclusive nor ultimately illuminating, for the myriad responses to the divine are all valid and the path hacked out by each individual as valuable as that wider road paved by tradition.

It is doubtful whether Orian works as a novel, though as spiritual biography it is clear and searchingly ruthless of the human condition. As a record of the times through which Orian lived it is invaluable, for anyone who missed the revolutionary epoch of the sixties and seventies would be able to reconstruct the formative spirit of the time from this book.

Each of Orian's encounters with a new spiritual discipline — and he meets very many — is imparted to the reader in the form of straight information and teaching. But this is insufficiently integrated into the story not to hold the reader up. Although it would have inordinately lengthened the book, such teachings are best imparted by a less intellectual process of osmosis. Put into the mouth of a loved character, they would have struck home more surely.

A similar problem dogs The Kingfisher's Wing, a fictional biography of Plotinus; one might indeed have looked far to find a more intractable subject for a biography, but Mary Casey takes what little evidence there is for Plotinus' life and employs it as the framework for his philosophy. For the reader who is used to picking up fiction for relaxation, biography for titillation and philosophy for the improvement of his mind, this book may prove something of an assault on his expectations.

Plotinus' self-effacement as a man and his diamond-sharp philosophic facility almost place him in a species somewhere between humanity and the spiritual hierarchies of the Gnostics, so distasteful to his reason. He eschewed the theurgy of his commentator, Porphyry, as well as the constraints of Christianity, preferring to steer by his daimon and by a disciplined combination of the Platonic pharoi of the One, the Good, the Beautiful, and the 'wild
Where Orian was in search of the One through the Many, here Plotinus is a true philosopher, no longer searching for the right direction but for the best means to communicate this philosophic direction to the minds of others. Plotinus' daimon may indeed have been divine, but it placed him in the unenviable position of god-like observer while still incarnate: a wonder to his fellow-beings, a cause of envy to his enemies, and a chimera to the man in the agora.

The position of the god-like man or woman, the saint or mystic has generally been a passive one in the Western esoteric tradition; the duty of the philosopher has been to find and discuss the most skilful means of utilizing inner wisdom, and its application to daily living. Plotinus' searchlight vision has generally proved too bright, too demanding, for it is nothing less than a total alignment with the Light of lights. But where the spiritual destiny of all men is to move towards that Light, a few enter it while yet incarnate, like Plotinus himself, or like Don Immanuel Cordovero, the subject of The Anointed, who is nothing less than 'a chosen one' or zaddik.

Set in that crucible of cultures, 15th century Spain, The Anointed tells the story of Don Immanuel, a Jewish convert to Christianity who yet lives by the esoteric tenets of his people's tradition, the Kabbalah. Like Plotinus, his duty is to teach and kindle the spark in the hearts of those drawn to the core of spiritual purpose, whether it be Christian, Jewish or Moslem. Indeed, his pupils are drawn from all three faiths, and it is the role of one of them to denounce him to the Inquisition at whose hands he suffers the usual penalty for his seeming pluralism.

The book documents the development of the many characters associated with Don Immanuel and demonstrates very clearly the psychic effect of his sacrifice to the Will of God: his daughter and fellow-kabbalists become the seed-bearers of tradition, taking their share in the implementation of their master's vision. On another level, Don Immanuel's death breaks down the last barriers to the expulsion of the Jewish community from Spain: his passing-over into death achieves a greater Passover for his people.

In an age when Christianity bickers feebly among its own folds and where the major religions fail to achieve an ecumenical resolve, it is good to look back to the golden era of Spanish culture, a few centuries before the time of this book, when Jews, Moslems and Christians met together, mingling on all levels of society. Each age has its redeemer or awakener whose life is a manifest example of how humanity may live: but it is not our part to worship and draw apart from their vision, as has so often been the case, but to exemplify these esoteric principles in our own lives that is important.

While the secular West has yet to implement its vision by first realising it, in India the sacrifice of Gandhi is already being forgotten: he, to whom
separatism was anathema, did not live to see the effects of religious partition in our own era, where exoteric belief has become the churn of political agitation and upheaval. We need those people whom the Kabbalah calls 'the Just Ones': ordinary humans living extraordinary lives whose effect is that of yeast in dough. When that yeast has permeated the soul and consciousness of our earthly race, then the Kingdom of God will indeed have come to earth.

Caitlin & John Matthews
Notes on Contributors

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.

Christopher Bamford Director of the Lindisfarne Press (Great Barrington, Massachussetts). Has edited The Noble Traveller, English translations of the principle works of O. V. de Lubicz Milosz. Forthcoming is a work on Scotus Eriugena’s Commentary on the opening verses of St. John’s Gospel. He plans to translate Milosz’s novel l’Initiation Amoureuse, and Novalis’s The Disciples of Sais. He has lectured at the American Theological Society’s annual conference on Henry Corbin and at the First Temenos Conference on the Protestant theologian Hamann.

Thetis Blacker is a painter, writer and dreamer. As a Churchill Fellow she has travelled to India and Indonesia and studied the fabric arts of South-East Asia. Her sixteen banners on the Creation were commissioned for the 900th anniversary of Winchester Cathedral and her dyed paintings have been commissioned for cathedrals and churches in Denmark and the U.S.A. as well as in England. She is the author of A Pilgrimage of Dreams and several television and documentary films have been made on her work. Four major series of her paintings have been based on mythical themes – ‘Apocalypse’, ‘A Bestiary of Mythical Creatures’, ‘The Creation’ and ‘Search for the Simurgh’. Her fifth theme, on which she is at present working is ‘the arbor cosmica’. She is currently involved in a scheme for preserving wall-paintings of Rajastan.

Stratford Caldecott is a senior editor at Routledge, with special interests in philosophy and theology. He is a consulting editor for the international theological review Communio, and has published articles in Resurgence, National Catholic Register, and The Cord.
Keith Critchlow is a geometer who emphasizes the sacred and its applications in architecture. His published works include *Time Stands Still*, *A New Light on Megalithic Science*, *Order in Space*, *Islamic Patterns*, *The Soul as Sphere* and *Androgyne*, *Tradition Proportion and Architecture*. Co-founder of Temenos, and of Kairos, a Society whose object is 'to investigate, study, record and promote traditional values of Science and Art'.


Biren De was born in Bangla Desh in 1926, graduated from the Government College of Art in Calcutta, migrated to Delhi in the early 'fifties. He did murals for the University of Delhi and taught for some years in the Delhi College of Art. Since that time he has been a recluse, developing his unique vision. He received a Rockefeller Grant in the late 'sixties and spent a year in the United States. He has also lived in Austria and in the Federal Republic of Germany. He represented India at the Sydney Biennale and was recently included in two major exhibitions of Tantric art – in Europe and in California.

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.

Modern and Otherwise, Lost Dimensions, For the Time Being, Mystics and Society, an article on 'Mysticism' in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Two of his latest works are: Meditation on Matricide: Some Ecological Essays (Ajanta Books International) and Rabindranath Tagore (Sahitya Akademi).

Yannis Ifandis was born on October 10, 1949 in Raina, Aetolia, northwest of the Corinthian Gulf, where he grew up on his father's tobacco farm, and to which he returns every summer. He studied law at the University of Thessaloniki for seven years, but left without taking his degree. When in need, he has worked on construction jobs or as a proofreader. In addition to one book of poems, he has translated Eliot's Four Quartets, St. John of the Cross, the Icelandic Edda, and has published a book on the mystics of the East. His poems have been translated into English, Italian and Rumanian.

Brian Keeble, 'onlie begetter' of Golgonooza Press Books. 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.


Martin Lings was formerly Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum. His books include: A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century, What is Sufism?, The Secret of Shakespeare (reviewed in Temenos 5), Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions, Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources, and The Eleventh Hour (of which this subtitle is The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Traditions and Prophecy). His Collected Poems are about to be published. He is also the author of the chapter on 'Mystical Poetry' in the New Cambridge History of Arabic Literature.

Keshav Malik, poet and critic. His latest volume of verse (1986) was titled Shapes in Feeling Plaster (Arnold Heineman, India). He edited Thought (weekly), Indian Literature (bimonthly) and Art and Poetry (quarterly) for several years. He now edits Poetry Bulletin (of the Poetry Society, of which he is one of the founders). He is also the art critic of the Times of India, a morning newspaper published in New Delhi, where he lives.

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* (Desclee 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).


**Peter Pelz.** 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.

Raja Rao. Indian Novelist and Philosopher. His novels include *Kanthapura* and *The Snake and the Rope*; a new novel is forthcoming. Raja Rao lived for many years in France and now divides his time between India and the United States.

Peter Redgrove. Poet, novelist, broadcaster, student of Hatha and Taoist Yoga and lay analyst. He is a prolific poet whose latest collection *In the Hall of the Saurians* (1987) and *Selected Poems* (*The Moon Disposes*) together with *The Black Goddess* and the *Sixth Sense* are reviewed in this issue. *The Wise Wound* (with Penelope Shuttle) awakened great interest in psychological circles and is now published in paperback (1986), with Penelope Shuttle Peter Redgrove is working on a sequel to this book, *Creative Menstruation*. His series of broadcast versions of Grimms Fairy Tales (1987) are in preparation as a book.

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. A collection of essays on the mental stresses of certain imaginative poets, including Christopher Smart, John Clare, Hart Crane, Hopkins, Rilke and others, will be published in 1988.

Anne Ridler, born 1912, poet, editor and translator of opera libretti, notably Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*. Books available include *Some Time After* (Faber) and *Selected Poems by George Darley* (Merrion Press). *New and Selected Poems* (Faber) is in the press.

Peter Russell, poet, translator, one-time editor of the Poetry Review Nine. Until the overthrow of the Shah he was teaching in association with the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy in Tehran. His most recent collection of poems, *All for the Wolves* was published by the Anvil Press in 1984. He is at present engaged in a translation of poems of Novalis. He was a friend of, and is an authority on, Ezra Pound.

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*. 
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 and Faber) and (with Edmund Keeley) Selected Poems of Angelos Sikelianos (Princeton University Press and Allen and Unwin). The Rape of Man and Nature (theological essays) the Golgonooza Press (England) and the Lindisfarne Press (U.S.A.).

Helena Shire (Helena Mennie) was born in 1912 in Aberdeen. She was a college friend of Olive Fraser there and in Cambridge. Married to Edward Shire of King’s College she brought up three children and taught English part-time in the university. She writes on medieval and renaissance poetry – Scottish and English – and is a Foundation Fellow of Robinson College, now emerita.

Salah Stétéé. Lebanese poet, essayist, and diplomat, recently Ambassador in Paris, the Hague, and Morocco; now living in Beirut. Born in 1929 he has published six collections of poems, and translations (into French) from the Arabic.

John Tavener b. 1944, English composer. First achieved recognition with The Whale (1965–6). Output includes Thérèse (an Opera) (Covent Garden 1979), Ultimos Ritos (setting of St. John of the Cross, 1969–72), Akhmatova Requiem (1979–80). Converted to Russian Orthodox Church in 1976, since when large output has been almost exclusively sacred. This includes Orthodox Vigil Service (Christchurch Oxford 1985), Eis Thanatou (Ode to Death 1986–87). Currently working on the Akathist: ‘Glory to God for everything’, The Protecting Veil for cello and orchestra, and Icon of St. Seraphim. Music performed all over the world. Tavener will be a subject of a television documentary later this year.

Arthur Versluis is author of several works, including the novels Telos (RKP: 1987) and The Ghost Dance (forthcoming), as well as the non-fictional The Philosophy of Magic (RKP: 1986) and The Egyptian Mysteries (RKP: 1988). His translation of Novalis' aphorisms – Pollen and Fragments – Selected Poetry and Prose of Novalis – will be published in 1988. He lives on the family orchards in Grand Rapids, Michigan, teaches at the University of Michigan, and is at present working on a collection of essays.


**Vernon Watkins.** Welsh Poet and friend of Dylan Thomas, died in 1946. His Collected Poems were published only in 1986 (Golgonooza Press). Seven volumes of his poems were published during his lifetime by Faber and Faber during the time of T. S. Eliot’s directorship. He was also a friend of W. B. Yeats, perhaps a closer affinity than his friend Dylan Thomas. Uncollected Poems and The Ballad of the Outer Dark were published by Enitharmon Press.