Persons of Interest

People, Books, Ideas, Encounters

Harry Oldmeadow

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We are all special cases.
Albert Camus

INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays and reviews comes hard on the heels of its companion volume, *Against the Tide: Sketches of Modern Christian Thinkers*. The connecting thread of that book was the fact that all of the essays concerned 'Christian thinkers' who had left a significant imprint on me. The present volume is bereft of any unifying theme or subject beyond this: all of its subjects have, at one time or another, excited my interest but, with a few exceptions, are not individuals about whom I have written hitherto. Much of my writing has focused on the great perennialist philosophers of the last century: René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and others. I retain the conviction that these are the most profound thinkers and visionaries of our time, and that both the enigmas of modernity and the Wisdom of the Ages are best understood through their work. But this is no reason to ignore everyone else. Most of the figures who appear in these pages are not perennialists. A few are saints and sages but many, like the rest of us, are deeply flawed individuals. Nonetheless, they seem to me to be worth our attention whatever their shortcomings may be and whatever disagreements and misgivings one may harbour. I hope I have refrained from excessive editorializing, allowing these individuals to speak for themselves and focusing on those aspects of their lives and works which shed some light, often obliquely, on our contemporary world and our human predicament. They are all 'modern' figures, at least in the sense that their lives unfolded in the last two centuries; the earliest of them was born in 1811 while, at the time of writing, only one is still alive.

Some essays present an overview while others focus on a singular book, idea or theme. Being no more than sketches, they make no pretension to deep scholarship. They are primarily intended as introductions for readers who may have a vague knowledge of the person in question but would like to know more. So, these essays are *points of entry*; free admission, no tickets required! Whilst I have indicated most of the my main sources, I have taken a relaxed attitude to documentation, thus mitigating the tedious proliferation of footnotes. Each piece includes notes on 'Principal Sources', referring only to those which were most profitable during my own researches and to which the interested reader might be directed. In many cases

there is a vast hinterland of books and articles which would be required reading for anyone launching more intensive and sustained research. The last section of the book comprises several recent book reviews through which readers might encounter a few more 'persons of interest'.

I hope that all who venture into these pages will find something to arrest attention, quicken the mind and nourish the spirit. Given the nature of the collection there is no need to read from front to back and no reason to discourage a piecemeal approach, as whim dictates.

Bendigo, 2023

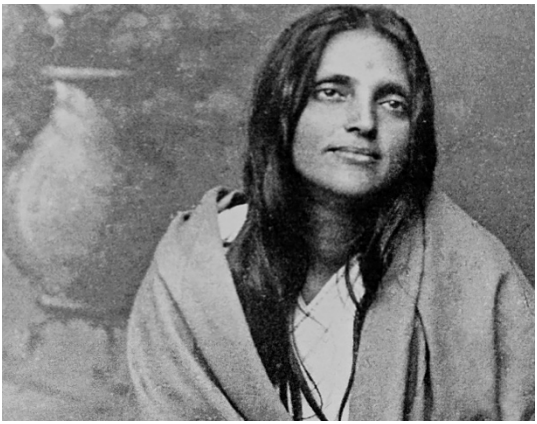
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to those who have taken an interest in my writings and here mention four who recklessly encouraged me to put together this compilation: Brian Coman, Steve Maber, Peter Thompson and Paul Weeks. My brother Peter's advice prompted me to refine the essay on Nietzsche, as did Peter Thompson's interventions. Maurie Nestor and Brian Coman helped polish the piece on Henry Backhaus. Michael Fitzgerald lent moral support from across the Big Water. But none are accountable for anything herein. Thanks to Nick at Eureka Printing. Rose always.

ANANDAMAYI-MA

1896-1982

'the most perfect flower of the Indian soil'



Saints are like trees. They do not call to anyone, neither do they send anyone away. They give shelter to whoever cares to come...

Since time immemorial India has been a land of pilgrims and itinerant renunciates, of pundits deeply versed in the religious tradition, charismatic gurus, hermits and ascetics, yogis and other adepts of arcane psycho-spiritual disciplines, a land of mystics, visionaries and ecstatic devotees. No doubt there have always been some frauds and charlatans in the mix as well; the last century has seen some of this disreputable lot thrive, at least for a while, in the West. No names need be mentioned. (Perhaps, after all, there is *something* to be said for George Orwell's dictum that 'saints' should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.[1]) Our concern here is with the genuine article, with saints and sages whose status, to use a worldly term, is beyond dispute. As far as the modern Indian era is concerned – let us say the last hundred and fifty years – there are three figures who, to my mind, pass all of the possible tests of sanctity

and sagacity with flying colours, though such a notion could not have been more foreign to their sensibilities: Paramahamsa Ramakrishna, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Anandamayi-ma. There is no need for the reader to become agitated! I do not for a moment suppose that this small list exhausts the case. One may, for instance, also mention Swami Ramdas (1884-1963) and the 68th Jadguru of Kanchipuram (1894-1994), both still little known in the West. Saints remain saints regardless of public perceptions. Others might want to enlist Mohendas Gandhi. Certainly the Mahatma was a man of saintly qualities but a more complex, problematic and controversial case. But let us leave the exemplary cases at three.

Ramakrishna, Ramana and Anandamayi-ma, as we shall see, each had a distinctive spiritual personality and a unique vocation. Nonetheless, there are some arresting similarities and convergences in their backgrounds, experiences and teachings. All came from humble beginnings in small villages; all were Brahmins; none had much formal education and the wellsprings of their spiritual development were not to be found in books; each was visited by unsought transformative experiences which left them without even a glimmer of doubt about the supra-material realities to which their visions and mystical illuminations gave access; each was spontaneously recognized as a 'higher being' with a powerful *darsan*, an irresistible spiritual presence, or radiance; none of them concerned themselves with worldly matters or paid the slightest homage to the idols of wealth, power, status, or sensual gratification; each lived a chaste life (two within celibate marriages), untouched by scandal or indeed impropriety of any kind; each wrote very little, if anything at all, and spent extended periods in *mouna* (holy silence) while none set themselves up as great teachers; insofar as they gave teachings, they were almost invariably of a deceptively simple kind, were in accord with the Hindu tradition, and satisfied simple village folk and the most erudite philosophers alike, as well as many sceptical Western seekers.

Ramakrishna died in an outlying neighbourhood of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in August, 1886. Less than a decade later, in April 1896, another luminous Bengali figure of the same sort of order was born in Kheora, in present day Bangladesh. Nirmala Sundari was born into a poor but devout and respected Brahmin family in a small village peopled by both Hindus and Muslims, and sometimes visited by Christian missionaries. Hindu devotional chants, the iman's call to

prayer and Christian hymns were in the air. After hearing some Christian missionaries singing hymns the little girl begged her mother to buy one of their Bengali hymn books. Her father was renowned as a singer of Vaisnavite devotional songs while the child was known in the village for her exceptionally sweet disposition, her perpetually cheerful outlook and her apparent indifference to any kind of adversity. Her village nickname was 'Mother of Smiles' while her given names, 'Nirmala Sundari', literally meant 'without taint' or, more poetically, 'Immaculate Beauty'. It soon became apparent that she was well-named. Because of the family circumstances Nirmala was to spend less than two years in total at school though her teacher had recognized her as being exceptionally 'quick' and 'bright'. She remained semi-literate throughout her life, never read books nor wrote down any teaching except for one small fragment, probably written in 1930, and, we might say, containing the quintessence:

O thou Supreme Being,
Thou are manifest in all forms
This universe, with all created things,
Wife, husband, father, mother and children, all in one.
Man's mind is clouded by worldly ties.
But there is no cause for despair.
With purity, unflinching faith and burning eagerness
Go ahead and you will realize your true Self.[2]

In conformity with Hindu custom, Nirmala was formally married at a young age, still not quite thirteen, but did not live with her husband for some years, spending an extended period first with her brother-in-law's family in Sripur where she devoted herself to domestic chores and the upkeep of the household, soon capturing the hearts of her new family. She proved to be a dab hand at spinning, sewing, weaving and cooking. Nirmala's husband, Ramani Mohan Cakravati, was a humble clerk in Dhaka whence Nirmala joined him, five years after their marriage ceremony. Like that of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi, it was to be an unusual union. When her husband made the initial sexual advances he suffered from an extraordinary physical charge which he likened to an electric shock and which disabused him of the notion that he had married an ordinary village girl. Quite a shock, no doubt! Remarkably, he soon understood and accepted that their relationship was to be celibate and, in time, he

actually become her disciple. We must surmise that Cakravati was able to accept this situation not only because of his own make-up but because of an infusion of his wife's spiritual energy. As Anandamayi-ma said of her husband later in life, 'he led an extraordinary life of self-denial and rigorous asceticism'.[3] He came to be known as 'Bholanatha', one of the names of Lord Siva. Soon after his wife joined him in Dhaka he was appointed as the caretaker of the extensive gardens of the Nawab of Dhaka, the *zamindar* of the largest Muslim estate in British Bengal.[4]

By the early 1920s Nirmala was becoming widely known as a figure with a rare spiritual aura. Even as a child she had fallen into strange meditative states. She was also in the habit of talking to plants. By her mid-teens she had been recognized by some as extraordinary and was addressed by a number of villagers as 'Ma'; a few prostrated themselves before her. She attracted further attention when she fell into rapturous swoons at public *kirtans* (the communal singing of devotional hymns). Sacred music was a recurrent motif in her life, often triggering an ecstatic state where her body would become stiff and she would enter an altered state of consciousness. An early disciple named her 'Anandamayi-ma', meaning 'Bliss Permeated Mother'; she also came to be known as 'Mata-ji', 'Respected Mother'.

The first ashram in her honour was built in Ramna in central Dhaka in 1929. From 1932 onwards she lived an itinerant life, travelling extensively throughout the sub-continent, devoting herself entirely to her followers. Many identified her as an *avatara* of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, speech, music and wisdom. In August 1982 she passed to the Further Shore in Varanasi, the ancient holy city on the banks of Mother Ganga. Here is how one Indian scholar sums up her life and work:

> She influenced the spirituality of thousands of people who came to see her throughout her life. She lived a simple life and had neither possessions not attachments and called no particular place her home… She lived her life for the sake of her devotees and the world, ever following the currents of her *kheyal*, the divine inner prompting that shaped all her movements and activities. People were drawn to her presence and the blissful divine nature of her personality changed them irreversibly… Though she remained passive, unobtrusive and mostly silent, ashrams

> and organizations sprang up in her name, organized by her devotees to provide venues for contact with and care of the multitudes. In her presence the poor were fed and cared for, social boundaries between castes lowered, and barriers between Hindu and Muslim followers were destroyed. She encouraged all to go forward to their spiritual destination, whatever the individual's path or religion.[5]

*

Anandamayi-ma became more widely known in the West after Swami Yogananda acclaimed her in his best-selling *Autobiography of a Yogi*, first published in 1946. The swami visited her in Calcutta in 1936, later recounting the way in which Anandamayi-ma responded to his invitation to say something about herself:

> There is little to tell [she said]. My consciousness has never associated itself with this temporary body. Before I came on the earth, 'I was always the same'. As a little girl, 'I was the same'. I grew into womanhood, but still 'I was the same'. When the family in which I had been born made arrangements to have this body married, 'I was the same'… And in front of you now, 'I am the same'. Ever afterwards, though the dance of creation change around me, 'I shall be the same'. Now and always one with That, 'I am ever the same'.[6]

Thus was she a living embodiment of one of the Four *Mahavakyas* ('great statements') of the *Upanishads*, *Tat Tvam Asi*: 'That Thou art'.

Arnaud Desjardins, the French filmmaker and author of *The Message of the Tibetans* was another who spread the word in the West. After his encounter with Mata-ji in Varanasi he stated that it was she who had made him understand the Gospels and Christ's message. Her seemingly intuitive and profoundly sympathetic understanding of religious traditions other than her own, particularly those with which she had been familiar since childhood – Islam and Christianity – is a keynote in her teachings. Nor did she identify herself or her teachings with any particular Hindu sect or doctrine although her central theme about the One is consonant with the most profound teachings of the *Upanishads*, the sage Sankara and the

Vedantic branch of the tradition while her own mystical experiences are suffused with a *bhaktic* (devotional) perfume. Another deeply appreciative Western student was the English photographer, painter, writer and Indophile, Richard Lannoy, whose Introduction to the hagiographical *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance: Diary Leaves of a Devotee* (1983) remains one of the best short accounts we have. Here is an excerpt:

> Certainly, Sri Anandamayi Ma was a woman, a Bengali, a 'great name' to conjure with… surely no single human being in the India of our time has reached more individuals with such perfect promptitude, wise counsel and deep spiritual insight. Yet there is a strangeness, a particularity, an indefinable rarity about Sri Anandamayi Ma, an uncanny, ineffable quality which comes so near the limits of the definably human as to make an adjective like 'human' quite inadequate when applied to Her case, and 'divine' paltry. It is widely accepted that She was, simply, unique.[7]

Other well-known Westerners who felt the power of Mata-ji's *darsan* included Douglas Harding, Melita Maschmann, and Alexander Lipski, the last-mentioned saying that she was both 'wholly other, the very embodiment of the Holy' and, at the same time, she was also 'so close and accessible'.[8] Following his first encounter with the saintly woman, Lipski (a highly educated and sophisticated Westerner), wrote, 'I was struck by the youthful almost girlish appearance of the then sixty-nine year old Anandamayi' and impressed by her 'pearly laughter' and the 'ease and assurance' with which she responded to 'the most recondite questions of erudite scholars'. Lipski also observed that she was also completely devoid of both fear and anger. Describing his first personal interview he wrote the following:

> Facing Mata-ji I felt as if I was mentally stripped naked. It seemed to me that She could see into the innermost recesses of my mind. I asked Her to tell me what the chief obstacles of my spiritual path were. In response She revealed to me some glaring shortcomings of which I had been hitherto totally unaware. What She said was in no way flattering, in fact painful, but Anandamayi Ma said it so compassionately, although firmly, that I did not feel condemned. I realized what true loving detachment was.[9]

After sitting at her feet in silence an English devotee similarly remarked, 'I felt that she was gazing at me, in me, through me and that gaze comprehended everything about me. I felt she loved me so utterly that I could never be the same again.'[10] Many people commented on the way they felt immediately accepted and loved as soon as they were brought into her presence.

There are several remarkable features of Anandamayi's life-journey and her spiritual power as both exemplar and teacher. Here we can only signal some of the most conspicuous: she belonged to no school or sect; she had no human guru, nor did she ever study sacred texts; her realisation did not issue from any effort towards enlightenment and did not 'evolve' but, she said, was 'always there', hidden in her early years by veils or 'superimpositions' of apparent ignorance. Perhaps most remarkable of all – possibly even of a miraculous order – was her own spiritual self-initiation, Mata-ji later explaining that the complex rites and symbols, previously unknown, had been revealed to her – the necessary flower offerings, mystical diagrams (*yantras*), the fire ceremony (*yajna*), and so on. Apparently she conducted the ceremony in strict conformity with the rules and procedures laid down in the *shastras* (Scriptures) even though she had never read them. She declared, 'As the master, I revealed the *mantra*; as the disciple, I accepted it and started to recite it.'[11] Another unusual pattern in her behaviour was that she sometimes lapsed into a Sanskrit-like language unknown to those around her. On at least one occasion, and in keeping with her deep reverence for Islam, she spontaneously recited some verses in Arabic from the *Quran*. From time to time she would shed copious tears without any obvious cause or provocation.[12] Not long after her initiation she gave up handling food, allowing her followers to put nutriments in her mouth. She also fasted frequently and is reported to have exhibited various powers such as being able to go without sleep for an indefinite period and the capacity to heal people of disease and infirmity by a mere touch. Following Bolonatha's initiation she maintained an almost continuous and complete silence for three years. Many of the stories about her are reminiscent of the Gospel accounts of Jesus. For my own part, and without forgetting the divide that separates the foundational religious figures such as Christ and Buddha from the 'communion of saints', reading about Mata-ji I am frequently struck by her affinities with Jesus. I have no difficulty with the idea that she may have been a true *avatara,* a celestial being – a big call made by

no means lightly. In any case, as already intimated, I believe she belongs in the very exalted company of Ramakrishna and Ramana.

Here's a passage from a dialogue between Mata-ji (A) and her interlocutor (Q) who had posed a question about the best path to Self-knowledge:

> A. All paths are good… Just as one can travel to the same place by plane, railway, car or cycle, so also different lines of approach suit different types of people.
>
> Q: But when there is only One, why are there so many different religions in the world?
>
> A: Because He is infinite, there is an infinite variety of conceptions of Him and endless variety of paths to Him. He is everything, every kind of belief, and also the disbelief of the atheist. He is in all forms and yet He is formless.
>
> Q. Ah, from what you said I gather you think the formless is nearer the Truth than God-with-form.
>
> A: Is ice anything but water? Form is just as much He as the formless. To say that there is only One Self and that all forms are illusion would imply that the formless was nearer to Truth than God-with-form. But this body declares: every form and the formless are He and He alone.[13]

From this brief exchange we may surmise much about Anandamayi-ma's attitude to religious pluralism and the diversity of spiritual paths, and to the nature of *maya*, the time-space world of forms. It has sometimes been suggested that the traditional Hindu conception is 'world-denying' insofar as it posits that the world of *maya* is illusory. Much fog arises from this misconception. Here is not the place for an inquiry into Vedantic metaphysics. Suffice it to say that the rigorous insistence on non-duality and on the *relative* 'unreality' of the material world in no way implies a denial or rejection of forms, of the 'world', of 'life'. Anandamayi's position is by no means eccentric or idiosyncratic. Furthermore, anyone even vaguely familiar with her life-story will know that she delighted in nature in all its variegated forms and that she showed the most tender and compassionate solicitude for all living creatures. Her scrupulous avoidance of doing any injury to life-forms, including plants, is Jain-like. She was an exemplary practitioner of the Gandhian ideal of *ahimsa* (non-

injuriousness). (We know that she greatly admired the Mahatma and after his assassination she compared his death to the Crucifixion of Christ, the only occasion on which she is known to have commented on a political event.[14]) The dialogue above also alerts us to some inseparable characteristics of Ananadamayi's teachings to which Richard Lannoy draws attention in writing, 'Mata-ji spoke at all times from the very fundament of *simplicity* – lightly, unhesitatingly' but with a 'completely *commanding authority* and *utter certainty*'.[15]

We should not allow Mata-ji's extraordinary *darsan* or her mystical incandescence to obscure the fact that she engaged with ordinary people at the deepest level, that she was able to offer concrete and practical advice to all those who sought her guidance, that she was an extraordinarily capable organizer and administrator. As Lannoy has declared, 'She was thus not only an exemplar of the exalted spiritual state, of *sadhana*, of psychological acuity, of compassionate succour, but a paragon too of action in service to the Supreme.'[16] We can say that Anandamayi-ma simultaneously and effortlessly pursued the three traditional yogic paths of *karma* (work, service), *bhakti* (devotion) and *jnana* (knowledge). She did so with a strength and energy which Lannoy properly notes was 'as subtle, as dynamic, and as elusive to grasp as a perfume or the sound of a distant bell'.[17] As one of her disciples observed, the purpose of her being was 'to demonstrate the existence of a power that is ever at work creating by Its transformative influence, beauty out of ugliness, love out of strife.'[18]

Non-duality and the need for self-inquiry remained her central message, as it was for her great contemporary, the Sage of Arunachala. Richard Lannoy, who sat at her feet and knew her well, observed that

> Sri Anandamayi Ma's attention is absolutely single and focussed upon one sole theme. Her discourse is shorn of the least irrelevance, the least detour into technicalities. Not a shred of spurious glamour or mystification. No announcement of secret esoteric doctrine. The urgency is irresistible… The matter in hand is that sole concern which unites all humanity, irreducible in its simplicity – immediate, totally accessible: the One.[19]

Late in her life she was asked what she considered the most important goal in life. Her answer might just as easily come from

Ramana Maharshi who insisted that the question 'Who Am I?' subsumed all others. Here is her answer:

> To try to find out who I am. To endeavour to know that which has brought into existence the body I know. The search after God. But first of all one must conceive the desire to know oneself. When one finds one's Self, one has found God; and finding God one has found one's Self.[20]

Even from so brief sketch I hope readers will see why Swami Shivananda, himself a person of formidable spiritual attainment, should declare Anandamayi-ma 'the most perfect flower of the Indian soil'.

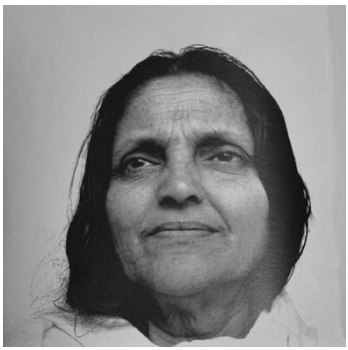


Photo by Richard Lannoy

Principal Sources

For short, accessible introductions see M.L. Ahuja, *Indian Spiritual Gurus: Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Icon, 2006) and Anne Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom: Women Mystics of the Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989) as well as the *Wikipedia* entry. For many years the most authoritative account was Alexander Lipski's *Life and Teaching of Sri Anandamayi Ma* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1977) but that is now subsumed by the lavishly illustrated and revised *The Essential Sri Anandamayi Ma: Life and Teachings of a 20th Century Indian Saint* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007). The most acute short summation is Richard Lannoy's Introduction to *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance: Diary Leaves of a Devotee*, second edition (Hardwar: Shree Anadamayee Sangha Kankhal, 2006).

1 George Orwell, 'Reflections on Gandhi' (1949) in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, *Vol 4: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, ed. Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus, 1980, 523.

2 Translated from the Bengali; cited in Alexander Lipski, *Life and Teaching of Sri Anandamayi Ma*, 1977, 3fn.

3 Lipski, *Life and Teaching*, 8.

4 'Anandamayi-ma', *Wikipedia*.

5 M.L. Ahuja, *Indian Spiritual Gurus: Nineteenth Century*, 2006, 215-6.

6 Quoted in Anne Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom: Women Mystics of the Twentieth Century*, 1989, 65-66.

7 Richard Lannoy, Introduction to *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance: Diary Leaves of a Devotee* (second edition), 2006, vi-vii. For a beautiful photograph of Anandamayi Ma by Lannoy, see Plate 430 in his captivating *Benares Seen From Within*, Bath: Callisto Books, 1999, 371. See also Plates 423-5, 427, 431 and 434. There are also many striking photos of the saint in Alexander Lipski, *The Essential Sri Anandamayi Ma*, 2007.

8 Lannoy, Introduction to *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance*, viii. Harding (1909-2007) was an English philosopher who achieved some popularity as the author of *On Having No Head: Zen and the Rediscovery of the Obvious* (1961); Melita Maschmann (1918-2010) was a former Nazi propagandist who later wrote *Account Rendered: A Dossier on my Former Self*, published in German in 1963 and in English in 2013; Richard Lipski (1919-2009) was an American scholar and author.

9 Lipski, *Life and Teaching*, viii.

10 Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom*, 62-63.

11 'Anandamayi-ma', *Wikipedia.*

12 Ahuja, *Indian Spiritual Gurus*, 210.

13 Excerpt from Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom,* 67-68.

14 Lipski, *Life and Teaching*, 28-29.

15 Lannoy, Introduction to *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance*, viii (italics mine).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Lipski, *The Essential Sri Anandamayi Ma*, ix.

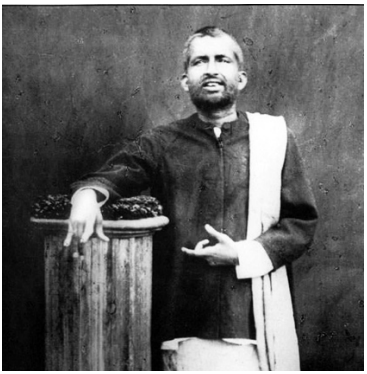
19 Lannoy, Introduction to *As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance*, ix.

20 Quoted in Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom*, 68-69.

PARAMAHAMSA RAMAKRISHNA

1836-1886

'spiritual plasticity of a miraculous order'



Know for certain that God without form is real
and that God with form is also real.

There are a good many reasons why Ramakrishna might have remained unknown to us: he was from a pious but poor Brahmin family in a small Bengali village in an obscure corner of a colonial empire; he was, in worldly terms, ill-educated, more or less illiterate, and wrote nothing; he was not physically prepossessing, nor blessed with any great oratorical or dialectical powers; he evinced not the slightest interest in either fame or fortune, nor did he aspire to being a public figure. He only took on the role of teacher and spiritual guide in the last six years of his life. His recorded sayings are, in most respects, quite unexceptional. He assuredly did not fit any conventional mould of the saint or sage. Yet we now know him to be one of the most astonishing figures in the long and venerable history of Hinduism, certainly one of greatest mystics and seers of the modern era, and a teacher whose vocation was providentially attuned to the peculiar needs of his era.

Ramakrishna was a happy child, popular in his village, but from an early age he exhibited three unusual characteristics (all shared by Anandamayi-ma): he often secluded himself to meditate in solitude; he experienced ecstatic trances; he was intensely devoted to the family deities and became quite enraptured during his devotional

practices at the local temple. The death of his father when the boy was seven marked a turning-point after which he lost all interest in school studies and sought out the company of holy men – the priests and swamis at the local temple and the renunciates who wandered through the village. Over the next thirteen years he devoted himself to religious studies, meditation and other spiritual disciplines. At the age of twenty he moved to Dakshineswar on the outskirts of Calcutta where his brother Ramkumar was a priest at the temple of Kali, the fearsome all-creating, all-destroying goddess. Within a year Ramkumar died and Ramakrishna succeeded him.

Ramakrishna soon attracted attention because of the ecstatic states into which he fell in front of the statue of Kali, seeming to undergo a kind of divine intoxication in which he was completely unaware of his surroundings, these states often lasting for several hours. News of such trances alarmed his mother who proposed an age-old remedy: marriage. Surprisingly, Ramakrishna readily agreed and told his family that his bride was already waiting for him, a young girl named Sarada Devi. They were formally married when Sarada was still only six. She remained in the village for several years before moving to the temple where she became Ramakrishna's companion, attendant and disciple. The marriage was never sexually consummated but their relationship was intimate and enduring.

Sarada Devi

Dakshineswar Temple

Over the next two decades Ramakrishna underwent a series of extraordinary experiences in which he seemed to interiorize the many modalities of Hindu spirituality, most conspicuously *bhakti yoga*, Tantra and Vedantic non-dualism. He remained a devotee of Kali but at various times he worshipped Shiva, Rama and Hanuman. He was initiated into esoteric Tantric practices by Bhairavi Brahmani, a wandering, middle-aged, female ascetic, and over the next two

years completed the sixty-four major *sadhanas* though his experience of the transformative Tantric sexual alchemy was psychological and symbolic rather than physical. (Here we shall by-pass the various controversies and misunderstandings which have accumulated around Tantra, especially its affirmation of sexuality as a path to spiritual growth. Suffice to note that Tantra was often ignorantly characterized by Western commentators as 'lust, mummery and black magic',[1] replete with vulgar superstitions and horrific practices.)

Ramakrishna also took teachings from a wandering mendicant, Tota Puri ('the Naked One'), a master of Advaita Vedanta. During this spiritual apprenticeship Ramakrishna fell into a mystical trance for no less than six months, his bodily needs ministered to by a monk. He was then instructed by Holy Mother Kali to remain on the brink of normal consciousness for another six months during which he suffered from severe dysentery. He only slowly returned to a 'normal' state wherein the ordinary mental operations came back into full play. By the age of thirty Ramakrishna was recognized as a *Paramahamsa* (Holy Swan)[2], one who has attained the highest flights of *samadhi* and thus has the fully developed power of discrimination, the ability to distinguish *Brahman* and *maya*, the absolutely Real and the relatively real or illusory. Ramakrishna was now a *jivan-mukti*, one who has reached Enlightenment and deliverance while yet in mortal form.

In the years following Ramakrishna had further exceptional experiences, including visions of Christ and the Holy Virgin, and spent time with a Sufi master. He often affirmed the validity of all of the great religious traditions with which he came into contact and with which he was able to engage existentially. In his later years his room was adorned with representations of deities and revered figures from the Hindu, Christian and Islamic traditions. As well as professing what Frithjof Schuon has called 'the transcendent unity of religions', Ramakrishna was also strongly opposed to religious conversions. This is not as contradictory as might initially be supposed.

In the last few years of his life Ramakrishna took on a more formal role as a guru and, without any apparent effort on his part, accumulated an extraordinary group of followers, many of whom would go on to become outstanding figures in their own right, Swamis Brahmananda and Vivekananda among them. In 1885 Ramakrishna developed throat cancer for which he received medical

treatment for several months before retreating to a garden house in Cossipore, on the northern outskirts of Calcutta, where he was cared for by Sarada Devi and his disciples. Before his passing Ramakrishna anointed Vivekananda as his successor. The story of the Ramakrishna Order which formed after the Paramahamsa's death is a fascinating one but cannot be rehearsed here. (Interested readers should turn to Isherwood's biography.[3]) Ramakrishna crossed to the Other Side on August 16th, 1886.

There are many aspects of Ramakrishna's life and teaching which deserve close attention but here we will restrict ourselves to three of them: his mystical experiences; his understanding of the relationship of religions; the synthesis in his own being of the many strands of the Hindu tradition.

Mystical Experience

The scholarly literature on mysticism is littered with foolish and bizarre claims, many of them betraying the futility of trying to explain the greater (the mystical experience) in terms of the lesser (this or that psychological theory), as if one could catch the wind in a net. Reductionism of this sort is rampant in the field of religious studies. Nonetheless, many scholars would endorse the view that there are three mystical streams, so to speak: 'nature mysticism' in which the beauty or power or majesty of some natural phenomenon – an animal, a landscape, a sunset, a flower – evokes rapturous feelings which might include joy, awe, reverence, bliss, ego-loss and so on; theistic mysticism in which one is overwhelmed by a vision or audition which comes from a 'supernatural' source (God, a god, an angel, a Bodhisattva, a saint, a guardian spirit, an ancestor); and non-dualistic mysticism which is formless and in which all oppositions disappear. Mystical illumination differs from ephemeral psychic experiences (a dream, for instance, or a psychedelic trip, or time-travel) in two crucial respects: it generates impregnable *certitude* about the supra-sensorial realities to which the experience has given access, and it triggers a radical and permanent *transformation* in the mystic.

Throughout his whole life Ramakrishna experienced all of these different mystical states. Many of his associates and disciples testified to the fact that he could fall into a trance at the sight of a girl dancing, a lion on the prowl, a dazzling sunset. Ramakrishna described just such an experience when he was only six years old. Walking through

the fields, munching on rice taken from a fold in his garment, the boy looked up to see a vast storm cloud sweeping across the sky. A flight of white cranes flew across the face of the black cloud, a sight of such beauty that Ramakrishna lost normal consciousness, fell to the ground and had to be carried home by some passing villagers. Then too there are the countless occasions, again beginning in childhood, when the depictions of the deities at the local temple triggered the same kind of experience, an encounter with what Rudolf Otto called 'the holy' or the 'numen', the *mysterium tremendum*. During his early days as a temple priest Ramakrishna spent many hours in prayer and meditation, hoping for visions of Kali. Here he describes one such vision:

> What I saw, was a boundless infinite conscious sea of light! However far and in whatever direction I looked, I found a continuous succession of effulgent waves coming forward, raging and storming from all sides with a great speed. Very soon they fell on me and made me sink to the unknown bottom. I panted, struggled and fell unconscious. I did not know what happened then in the external world – how that day and the next slipped away. But, in my heart of hearts, there was flowing a current of intense bliss, never experienced before, and I had the immediate knowledge of the light that was Mother.[4]

At certain periods of his life, particularly in the early 1860s, Ramakrishna seemed to be seized by a kind of spiritual delirium bordering on madness. Today he would be institutionalized, at least in the West. Here he is describing months of tempest and turmoil:

> No sooner had I passed through one spiritual crisis than another took its place. It was like being in the midst of a whirlwind, even my sacred thread was blown away. I could seldom keep hold of my *dhoti* [cloth]. Sometimes I would open my mouth, and it would be as if my jaws reached from heaven to the underworld. 'Mother!' I would cry desperately. I felt I had to pull her in, as a fisherman pulls in fish with his dragnet. A prostitute walking the street would appear to me to be Sita, going to meet her victorious husband. An English boy standing cross-legged against a tree reminded me of the boy Krishna, and I lost consciousness. Sometimes I would share my food with a

> dog. My hair became matted. Birds would perch on my head and peck at the grains of rice which had lodged there during the worship. Snakes would crawl over my motionless body. An ordinary man couldn't have borne a quarter of that tremendous fervour; it would have burnt him up. I had no sleep at all for six long years. My eyes lost the power of winking. I stood in front of a mirror and tried to close my eyelids with my finger and I couldn't! I got frightened and said to Mother: 'Mother, is this what happens to those who call on you? I surrendered myself to you, and you gave me this terrible disease!' I used to shed tears – but then, suddenly, I'd be filled with ecstasy. I saw that my body didn't matter – it was of no importance, a mere trifle. Mother appeared to me and comforted me and freed me from my fear.[5]

It was only under Tota Puri's tutelage that Ramakrishna experienced the full plenitude of non-dualistic enlightenment, *nirvikalpa samadhi.* No doubt this final awakening was the fruit of his many years of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) but amazing to his guru in its rapidity: 'Is it indeed true, what I see enacted before me? Has this great soul actually realized in a day what I could experience only as the fruit of forty years of austere *Sadhana*?... Is it in truth *Samadhi*? Is it the *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*, the ultimate result attained through the path of knowledge spoken of in the Vedanta?'[6] Tota Puri did not doubt it.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

Ramakrishna experienced visions of Jesus, the Virgin and the Prophet, took teachings from a Sufi master, requested his disciples to read to him from the Bible, burnt incense and made flower offerings to representations of Christ whom he called 'the Great Yogi'. (He particularly favoured a painting of Christ rescuing St Peter from the waves.) As Francis X. Clooney has noted, Ramakrishna's receptivity to Christ shows a way in which Christians might, in turn, respond to 'the mystery, beauty and holiness of non-Christian religions'.[7] In 1866, after receiving Sufi teachings, Ramakrishna immersed himself for a period in Islamic practices in which, he said, he 'devoutly repeated the name of Allah, wore a cloth like the Arab Muslims, said their prayer five times daily, and felt disinclined even to see images of the Hindu gods and goddesses, much less worship them – for the

Hindu way of thinking had disappeared altogether from my mind.' [8] Elsewhere Ramakrishna remarked,

> I have also practised all religions, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects… the lake has many shores. At one the Hindu draws water in a pitcher and calls it *jala*, at another the Muslim in leather bottles, and calls it *pani*, at a third a Christian finds what he calls *water*.[9]

What are we to make of all this? Well, there is much that might be said but Frithjof Schuon has said, in the most lucid and compelling fashion, what most needs saying:

> In Ramakrishna there is something which seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inner unity of religions; he was, in fact, *the first saint to wish to penetrate foreign spiritual forms*, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission... In our times of confusion, disarray and doubt he was the saint called to 'verify' forms and 'reveal', if one can so express it, their single truth... His spiritual plasticity was of a miraculous order.[10]

Ramakrishna and the Hindu Tradition

The India in which Ramakrishna lived was massively contaminated by Western thought and national cultural morale was at a very low ebb. Many of the educated class devalued their own tradition and aped the intellectual fashions of the West. (We shall presently turn to this subject in considering the problematic role of Swami Vivekananda in establishing the Ramakrishna Order and becoming one of the leading lights in the 'Hindu Renaissance' of the late 19thC.) Ramakrishna's life also spanned a period in which there was a great deal of factionalism, division and acrimony in the relations of the different branches of Hinduism. For the moment we can simply note that part of Ramakrishna's mission was to reaffirm the vitality, profundity and integrity of the Hindu tradition by reconciling within himself the apparent divergences and antagonisms in the tradition. Hence his sympathetic receptivity to both monistic and dualistic metaphysics, his immersion in bhaktic, tantric and jnanic practices, his reverence for both Saivite and Vaisnavite deities, his deep respect for Mahavir, the great prophet of Jainism, and for the luminaries of

the Sikh tradition. He became a kind of living compendium of Hindu spirituality. As one of his disciples said of him, 'Ramakrishna was a living commentary on the texts of the *Upanishads*, was in fact the spirit of the *Upanishads* in human form... the harmony of all the diverse thought of India.'[11] Romain Rolland, the French litterateur and one of the saint's biographers, was moved to say that Ramakrishna was 'the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people'.[12] Normally we might dismiss such effusive praise as hagiographical gush; in Ramakrishna's case the claim is altogether credible.

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda in Schuonian Perspective

Given the fact that it was largely through Vivekananda that Ramakrishna came to be known in the West, the two names inextricably intertwined, it is worth noting a certain incommensurability between the two. Vivekananda came to be closely associated with the neo-Hindu reform movement, with Indian nationalism and with a 'universalist' religion based on Advaita Vedanta; in each of these respects his outlook and his teaching was quite foreign to that of his teacher. Here we can explore the issues at hand by way of the writings of Frithjof Schuon, one of the most authoritative commentators on Ramakrishna and on the religious tradition of which he became a living exemplar. Schuon writes from the vantage point of the perennialist philosophy of which he was the pre-eminent exponent.

As we have seen, it was part of Ramakrishna's vocation to validate traditional religious forms (myths, doctrines, rites, institutions) whereas reformers like Vivekananda imagined that this legacy could be abandoned in the name of some higher ideal – 'truth', 'progress', 'science', 'reason', 'universal religion' or some other shibboleth of the modern Western ethos. Vivekananda's assertion that 'Temples and churches, books and forms are simply the kindergarten of religion...' is typical: it is justified in the name of 'realisation'.[13] No one disputes that realisation takes precedence over all other claims but this is no reason to capitulate to the 'mystical prejudice' that nothing counts in the spiritual life except 'states', a prejudice widespread in India.[14] Vivekananda failed to grasp the necessity and value of forms which must remain inviolate for the vast majority of believers. Schuon's cautionary words could not be more pertinent:

> When a man seeks to escape from 'dogmatic narrowness' it is essential that it should be 'upwards' and not 'downwards': dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic 'ideal' of 'pure truth'.[15]

Traditionalists like Schuon affirm a *sophia perennis* at the heart of each integral tradition without bias towards any particular tradition and without any wish to synthesize or distil any 'universal' or 'new' religion, to fashion what Coomaraswamy called a kind of 'religious Esperanto' – and doomed to the same fate! Vivekananda and many of his Western epigones (including Christopher Isherwood, one of the 'California Vedantins') asserted that Advaita Vedanta (as understood by themselves) provides a platform on which can be mounted some kind of universal religion. Vivekananda: 'Vedanta, and Vedanta alone can become the universal religion of man... no other is fitted for that role.'[16] Now, Schuon himself is the first to affirm that Sankara's perspective is 'one of the most adequate expressions possible of the *philosophia perennis* or sapiential esoterism'.[17] But we will certainly not find him indulging in loose talk about a 'universal religion' nor claiming that Vedanta is the sole possible expression of what it expresses.

While leaving no doubt as to Ramakrishna's sanctity and the spiritual radiance which emanated from his person, Schuon notes several vulnerabilities in his position *vis-à-vis* an emergent neo-Hinduism: a *jnana* (knowledge) extrinsically ill-supported because of his almost exclusive faith in the spiritual omnipotence of love, whence 'an inadequate integration of the mind in his perspective'; a universalism 'too facile because purely bhaktic'; an absence of safeguards against the corrosive influences of a modernism which left the saint himself untouched but which pervaded the milieu in which he found himself and which, in a sense, took a posthumous revenge through the influence of Vivekananda.[18] Ramakrishna, although instinctively suspicious of movements like the Brahmo-Samaj, was not altogether cognizant of the dangers posed by modernism. Furthermore, he attributed to his disciple 'a genius for ontological and plastic realisation which he neither had nor could have',[19] Narendra being a person in the grip of certain 'dynamic' mental tendencies which precluded any kind of realisation comparable to that of the Master himself.[20]

In a traditional framework which was 'entire, closed and without fissures' the potentialities for heterodoxy which lurked in Vivekananda's make-up might well have been 'rectified, neutralised and compensated'. However, as it was, Vivekananda's development was shaped not only by the *Paramahamsa* but an 'Occidentalism which was unknown and incomprehensible to Ramakrishna but which stimulated in the disciple exactly those tendencies the development of which had at times been feared by the master.'[21] One such development, of which Ramakrishna had some premonition, was the founding of a sect or order, a function which he explicitly rejected as being outside Vivekananda's proper vocation.[22] It might also be noted that Ramakrishna could not have foreseen the consequences of causes which he himself had not conceived – the fact, for instance, that Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta was to be filtered through a screen of misconceptions and prejudices generated by modernist influences.

Schuon concedes that the enigma of Vivekananda can perhaps be explained in terms of the fact that Hindu-Indian nationalism was inevitable and that the Swami was its predestined champion. In order to fulfil such a role Vivekananda had need of a certain anti-traditional mental dynamism and of some of the ideological premises of the modern West:

> In 'modernising' Hinduism Vivekananda did at the same time 'Hinduize' modernism, if one may so put it, and by that means neutralised some of its destructive impetus... if it was inevitable that India should become a 'nation' it was preferable that it should become so in some way under the distant auspices of Ramakrishna rather than under the sign of a modernism that brutally denied all that had given India its reason to live for thousands of years past. [23]

This notwithstanding, the fact remains that much of Vivekananda's teaching was anti-traditional, both intrinsically and extrinsically. It is as clear as the day from his own writings that his conception of tradition was of the vaguest kind, that he had scant understanding of the reciprocal relationships of the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion, that he was less than vigilant in preserving 'the incalculable values of orthodoxy', that much of his talk about 'universal religion' is of the sentimental variety, that his understanding of Vedanta is compromised by modernist ideas, and

that he had none of his master's genius for penetrating foreign religious forms.

Vivekananda's penchant for the facile formulation and his disregard for traditional proprieties is suggested by his equation of Jesus, the Buddha and Ramakrishna. It is worth rehearsing Schuon's objections to this 'trinity':

> It is unacceptable, first, because it is impossible in a truly Hindu perspective to put Buddha and Christ in a trinity to the exclusions of Rama and Krishna; secondly because Christ is foreign to India; thirdly, because, if non-Hindu worlds are taken into account, there is no reason for taking only Christ into consideration still, of course, from the point of view of Hinduism; fourthly because there is no common measure between the river Ramakrishna and the oceans that were Jesus and the Buddha; fifthly, because Ramakrishna lived at a period in the cycle which could in any case no longer contain a plenary incarnation of the great amplitude of the great Revealers; sixthly, because, in the Hindu system there is no room for another plenary and 'solar' incarnation of Divinity between the ninth and the tenth Avataras of Vishnu – the Buddha and the future *Kalki-Avatara*.[24]

A small sample of quotes will be sufficient to expose the most absurd errors and incomprehensions in Vivekananda's thought. No traditionalist would be capable, in any circumstances whatever, of giving voice to anything like the following:

> The visions of Moses are more likely to be false than our own because we have more knowledge at our disposal and are less subject to illusion (from *Inspired Talks*).[25]

A whole chain of prejudices lies behind this kind of formulation. Certainly no traditionalist would dream of comparing him/herself with Moses nor succumb to the ignorant complacency implied by the reference to our own 'enlightened' times. Another example:

> The Buddhas and Christs we know are heroes of second grade compared with those greater ones of which the world knows nothing (from *Karma Yoga*).

– as if the perfections of Christ and the Buddha were a matter of degree which could be surpassed. This sort of thing one might expect from a progressive humanist but hardly from a man of Vivekananda's pretensions. Such an utterance is inconceivable in the mouth of Ramakrishna. And yet another statement even more astonishing, if that be possible:

> We have seen that the theory of a personal God who created the world cannot be proved. Is there today a single child who could believe in it?... Your personal God, Creator of this world, has he ever succoured you? This is the challenge flung down by modern science (from *Conference on the Vedanta*).

One hardly knows where to start in excavating the prejudices buried in this: the importing of considerations ('proof') into a domain where they do not apply, the brutal insolence of such condescension to countless millions of theists, both in India and elsewhere, the incomprehension of the spiritual economy of theistic perspectives, the utterly irrelevant appeal to modern science – all this from a man whose effusive apologists do not hesitate to compare him to Sankara!

Lest the reader imagine that such statements are unrepresentative one can only direct them to Vivekananda's writings about other religions. For a quite extraordinary agglomeration of self-contradictions, half-baked ideas and extravagant assertions one need look no further than the essay 'Buddhistic India'.[26] However, a scrutiny of almost any of Vivekananda's writings will expose the Trojan Horse of modernism, one which is likely to discharge its unattractive occupants at any turn. One can only sympathise with Mircea Eliade's reaction to Vivekananda's work: 'I was later to receive Vivekananda's books. But they didn't win me over. I was already immune to spiritualistic rhetoric, to popularised neo-Vedantic fervour; all that seemed shoddy to me.'[27] Quite! None of this is to gainsay the Swami's prodigious talents, his personal charisma, or his effectiveness as a spearhead for the Hindu Renaissance. Such considerations are not germane to our present purpose which is simply to demonstrate that there is no common measure between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.[28] (Some of the swami's indubitable gifts and attainments will be acknowledged in the essay immediately following.)

Principal Sources

Biographies: *The Life and Sayings of Ramakrishna* by the German orientalist, Max Müller; *The Life of Ramakrishna* (1929) by French philosopher-writer Romain Rolland; *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (Advaita Ashrama, 1964) by the English novelist Christopher Isherwood (the best of the Western biographies); Swami Saradananda's *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* (2010). Perceptive commentary can be found in T.M.P. Mahadevan's *Ten Saints of India (*Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), Swami Prabhavananda's *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), Frithjof Schuon's magisterial essay on the Vedanta in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Perennial Books, 1969), and A.K. Coomaraswamy's 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance' in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers, Vol 2, Metaphysics* ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton University, 1977). See also Mateus Soares de Azevedo, 'Frithjof Schuon and Sri Ramana Maharshi' in *Sacred Web* 10 (online). The *Wikipedia* entry on Ramakrishna includes a survey of the many outlandish Western theories about the saint.

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1 See 'Yoga', *Wikipedia.*

2 In Hindu mythology the swan is attributed with the power to separate milk from the water with which it is mixed, and is thus a symbol of the power of discrimination. See M.L. Ahuja, *Indian Spiritual Gurus, Nineteenth Century*, 2006, 29.

3 Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 1964.

4 'Ramakrishna', *Wikipedia.*

5 This passage comes from Swami Chetananda's *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, cited in *Wikipedia*.

6 'Ramakrishna', *Wikipedia.*

7 Francis X Clooney, 'Ramakrishna and Christ', cited in *Wikipedia.*

8 'Ramakrishna', *Wikipedia.*

9 Ramakrishna quoted in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance', in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers Vol 2; Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey, 1977, 34. When Ramakrishna speaks of 'all religions' he is referring to those which appeared in his own spiritual universe.

10 Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1969, 115 & 119.

11 T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ten Saints of Modern India*, 1965,116.

12 Romain Rolland, *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, Advaita Ashrama, 1929, xxii.

13 Vivekananda quoted in A.R. Wadia in 'Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy of Religion' in *Swami Vivekananda's Memorial Volume,* ed. R.C. Majumdar, Swami Vivekananda Centenary, 1963, 257.

14 See Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995, 5.

15 Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: Perennial Books, 1961, 16.

16 Quoted in P. Atmaprana: 'Swami Vivekananda on Harmony of Religions and Religious Sects' in *Swami Vivekananda's Memorial Volume* , 311.
17 Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, Perennial Books, 1981, 21.
18 Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 116–118.
19 Ibid, 119.
20 Ibid, 124.
21 Ibid, 118.
22 See Swami Vireswarananda's *Life of Shri Ramakrishna* cited by Schuon in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts,* 188–189fn. Incidentally, Schuon does point out that 'there are contemplatives of the line of Ramakrishna whose spirituality is impeccable' and who transmit 'a perfectly regular doctrine... whatever may be their feelings on the subject of Vivekananda.' Swami Brahmananda is one such. See 120fn.
23 Ibid, 121.
24 Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, World Wisdom, 1998, 87fn. This reproach is made in a footnote to a discussion of the Prophet, more or less as an aside. It might be thought that to quote it at such length over what some will see as a minor point, is disproportionate. However, this passage demonstrates the principial rigour which always shapes Schuon's work and alerts us to the fact that Schuon is more conversant than Vivekananda with the claims and proprieties of Hindu tradition. The passage also reminds us of the dangers of a universalist 'hospitality' offered at the expense of doctrinal rigour and discrimination.
25 This passage and the two following are cited in *Spiritual Perspectives* (124-5) without comment by Schuon. They speak for themselves!
26 Reproduced in *Swami Vivekananda's Memorial Volume*, xxi–xliv.
27 M. Eliade *No Souvenirs,* New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 134.
28 On this question see F. Matchett:, 'The Teaching of Ramakrishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekananda', *Religion* XI, 1981, 171–184.

SISTER NIVEDITA

1867-1911

'who gave her all for India'

> *Are the countrymen of Bhaskaracharya and Shankaracharya inferior to the countrymen of Newton and Darwin? We trust not. It is for us, by the power of our thought, to break down the iron walls of opposition that confront us…*[1]

In 1898, a world-renowned Indian swami wrote the following to a young Anglo-Irish woman:

> You will be in the midst of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste and isolation, shunning the white skin through fear or hatred, and hated by them intensely. On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the whites as a crank, and every one of your moves will be watched with suspicion.[2]

He was Swami Vivekananda, by now probably the most widely known Indian in the Western world; she was Margaret Noble, thirty years old, daughter of a Methodist minister, journalist, a school teacher of ten years experience, headmistress of a progressive school

in Wimbledon, agitator for Irish Home Rule, socialist champion of the poor, feminist and something of a firebrand. At Lady Ripon's Sesame Club she had met GB Shaw, Thomas Huxley and Yeats, and was well established in a brilliant career as writer, educationalist, lecturer and champion of 'every kind of emancipation'.[3] But after hearing a lecture from the charismatic Vivekananda she had resolved to abandon England, to become his disciple, and to dedicate herself to a life of service in India.

Margaret Noble had earlier become disenchanted with the strict Protestant Christianity in which she was raised, and intellectually disturbed by the apparent conflict of religious faith and modern science, particularly Darwinism. For a time she was attracted to Buddhism but it was the Hindu tradition in which she took refuge. Initially somewhat sceptical of the flamboyant Bengali monk who was exciting such interest on his lecture tours of America and the United Kingdom, Noble found herself deeply attracted to his religious universalism She found the keynote of Vivekananda's lectures to be his insistence on 'the equal truth of all religions, and the impossibility for us of criticizing any of the divine incarnations, since all were equally forth-shinings of the One'.[4] Another of his central themes also struck a chord: the primacy of spiritual experience over dogmas, creeds, sects, rites and institutions, and the ideal of realisation as the supreme end of all religion. His words, she said, 'came as living water to men perishing of thirst'

Vivekananda was born Narendra Nath Datta in Calcutta in 1863, into a wealthy family of scholars, philanthropists and monks.[5] At university Narendra had shown prodigious talents – intellectual, musical, theatrical, athletic – exhibiting all the vigour and vitality appropriate to the *Kshatriya* caste to which he belonged. He had an exceptionally intelligent, lively mind and an engaging personality, and seemed poised for a glittering career in law. Instead, answering an inner call which he had felt since childhood, Narendra turned his back on all worldly ambitions and enticements, became one of the principal disciples of Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, eventually being known as Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda

Some years after the death of his master in 1886 Vivekananda attended the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago and lectured extensively in America, the UK and Europe. An address to the graduate students in the philosophy department at Harvard ignited such enthusiasm that he was forthwith offered a chair in Eastern Philosophy, an overture which his monastic vocation obliged him to decline.[6] His dynamic personality, his spiritual teachings and his nerve-tingling oratory generated a good deal of fervour and it was at this time that he attracted several Westerners who were to be amongst his most devoted and energetic English disciples: Captain Sevier and his wife, Josiah J. Goodwin who became the recorder of Vivekananda's lectures, and Margaret Noble. Vivekananda returned to India in a blaze of triumphant publicity and soon turned his considerable energies to the founding of the Ramakrishna Order, Mission. In *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* Christopher Isherwood usefully summarized the aims of the Mission:

> The Mission will preach the truths which Ramakrishna preached and demonstrated in his own life. It will help others to put these truths into practice… It will train men to teach such knowledge or sciences as are conducive to the material and spiritual welfare of the masses. It will establish centres for monastic training and social work in different parts of India. It will also send trained members of the Order to countries outside India, to bring a better relation and a closer understanding between them. Its aims will be purely spiritual and humanitarian; therefore it will have no connection with politics.[7]

By the turn of the century Vivekananda had become closely, and somewhat reluctantly, associated with the cause of Indian nationalism as well as the burgeoning Hindu reform movement.

Margaret Noble arrived in Calcutta in January 1898. Thenceforth, until the early death of Vivekananda in 1902, aged forty, she was to be his closest Western disciple and was referred to by the monks of the order as his 'spiritual daughter'. Her biographer has described her initial reactions to a land so different from the Victorian drawing-rooms she had left behind:

> …when, by [Vivekananda's] side she saw Calcutta for the first time – the teeming life of the city, the noise, the colour and the peaceful movements of the brown waters of the Ganges – she fell utterly and irrevocably in love – not with Calcutta, but with India. It was a love affair that hit her with immense force because it was so unexpected. She had wanted to help with the work, she had been eager to come, but she had not expected anything like this.[8]

She moved into a small cottage on the banks of the holy river with two of Vivekananda's other Western disciples, Josephine McCleod and Mrs Ole Bull, widow of the Norwegian violinist and friend of Ibsen.

Noble took to heart Vivekananda's injunction:

> You have to set yourself to Hinduize your thoughts, your needs, your conceptions, and your habits. Your life, internal and external, has to become all that an orthodox Hindu Brahmin Brahmacharini's ought to be.[9]

She succeeded remarkably well. She learnt Bengali, visited schools to understand the demands of her chosen field of work, underwent training with Vivekananda and took vows of celibacy as a novice in the Ramakrishna order, and became known as Sister Nivedita ('dedicated to God'). She overcame the initial suspicion, even hostility, of some of the monks of the Order and developed a close relationship with the Holy Mother, Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna's wife), with whom she lived for a time. She eventually moved into very humble quarters in one of Calcutta's poorest sectors where, within eight months of arriving in India, she established a school for girls, initially in her own house. (The school, much expanded, survives to this day as the Sister Nivedita School.) Her lifestyle was frugal in the

extreme. She also dedicated herself to working with the poor whom she served with indefatigable energy and was much admired by Indians for her heroic efforts during famine, flood and plague epidemics which afflicted Bengal around the turn of the century.

Early in the piece Vivekananda had discerned in Margaret Noble a potential champion of Indian women: 'Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man but a woman, a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women especially.'[10] She nurtured the education and social emancipation of Indian women, especially widows, although she also affirmed the traditional institutions of child marriage and perpetual widowhood which drew the ire of some of her feminist friends. Sister Nivedita also became a public speaker of some renown, lecturing on religious and social subjects. One of her early lectures, delivered in Calcutta's Albert Hall to a huge audience, was on the subject of Kali, the terrible goddess to whom Ramakrishna himself had been dedicated, and the controversial practice of Kali worship which she passionately defended against both Western and Indian detractors:

> We are aware [she said] of the many beastly and corrupt rites which have come to be associated with Kali worship. While our regret for them is boundless, we do not see the wisdom of inveighing against Kali-worship in wholesale manner… Destroy the weeds but save the garden![11]

This lecture, to be repeated in many parts of India, earned her acclaim in some quarters, notoriety in others. She later wrote what was to prove one of the most popular of her many books, *Kali the Mother* (much admired by Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Coomaraswamy). She accompanied Vivekananda on another tour of America and Britain and became a popular lecturer in her own right, using the proceeds to fund her school in Calcutta and her social work amongst the poor. She excited a storm of controversy in London through her scathing criticisms of the ways in which some Christian missionaries so persistently misrepresented Hinduism and the Indian social order. (She was scrupulous in avoiding any criticism of their religious teachings.)[12]

By the time of Vivekananda's death she had left far behind her the naïve British patriotism with which she had arrived in the sub-continent and had become a champion of Indian independence and a

fierce critic of the colonial regime, a role for which she was peculiarly well-equipped:

> Her entire nature fitted her for it; all the 'fighting Irish' in her was awake; she had already proved that she could rouse large Hindu audiences to enthusiasm; she had the undoubted asset, in India, of being a disciple of their much-loved leader; she was a woman and a nun, and therefore a mother-figure and liable to be treated with respect; she was a member of the ruling nation by birth who had become totally a Hindu in thinking and loyalties… And she longed to fight for India…[13]

Vivekananda himself had written to Nivedita, 'Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted.'[14] Because of the monastic prohibition on overt political activism she felt she must now, after Vivekananda's death, sever her formal ties with the Ramakrishna Order but in her heart she remained true to her vows. She also continued her warm friendship with Sarada Devi, with the monks at the Ramakrishna Math and with other Western devotees.

As a tireless and fiery critic of British rule and advocate of the nationalist cause she befriended such figures as Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and various other members of that illustrious family, the Congressional leaders GK Gokhale and RC Dutt, and Mrs Annie Besant, leader of the Indian branch of the Theosophical Movement. She had a fleeting meeting with the young Gandhi, still a somewhat peripheral figure in the independence movement, who later wrote of her in the most respectful terms. In some respects she had anticipated some of the themes central to Gandhi's later campaigns. After meeting the Russian anarchist Prince Kropotkin in London, and reading his work, she had written:

> He knows more than any other man what India needs. What I specially dwell upon is the utter needlessness of governments… the village system supplies machinery of self-government enough… We shall one day peacefully wait upon the Viceroy and inform him, smiling, that his services are no longer required. The great means of doing it will be elaborated by degrees as we come to have what Mr Geddes calls 'a theory of the Pacific Life'.[15]

She spoke on political themes in many parts of India and published in a wide variety of newspapers and journals, for a time editing Aurobindo's *Karma Yogin*. Nivedita left her Calcutta school in the capable hands of her friend Sister Christine,[16] and in 1902, 1904, and again in 1907, spoke at venues all over the sub-continent on both religious and political subjects. She was a eloquent advocate for the *swadeshi* movement (the boycott of British-made goods) and an equally forceful opponent of Bengali partition, imposed by Curzon in 1905. As Gandhi was to do, she enjoined Muslims and Hindus to stand side-by-side as Indians:

> What then was the duty of the Indian Mussalman? It was not to relate himself to Arabia... he had no need of that; it had been accomplished for him by the faith and patient labour of his fore-fathers. No; his duty was to relate himself to India – his home by blood or by adoption and hospitality…[17]

Nor did she have any patience with one of the constant themes of imperialist propaganda (still alive in Britain today!) – that 'India' enjoyed no unity beyond that 'given' to her by her benevolent colonizers:

> There is a religious idea that may be called Indian, but it is of no single sect;... there is a social idea, which is the property of no caste or group;… there is a historic evolution, in which we are all united;… it is the thing within all these which alone is called 'India'.[18] We must create a history of India in living terms. Up to the present that history, as written by the English, practically begins with Warren Hastings, and crams in certain unavoidable preliminaries, which cover a few thousands of years... The history of India has yet to be written for the first time. It has to be humanized, emotionalized, made the trumpet-voice and evangel of the race that inhabit India.[19]

Furthermore, she claimed, 'the presence of a foreign bureaucracy adds immensely to the evil characteristics of the modern epoch.'[20]

Her friend HW Nevinson has left us a vivid pen-portrait of Sister Nivedita at this time:

> It is as vain to describe Sister Nivedita in two pages as to reduce fire to a formula and call it knowledge… Like fire,

> and like Shiva, Kali and other Indian powers of the spirit, she was at once destructive and creative, terrible and beneficent. There was no dull tolerance about her, and I suppose no one ever called her gentle…[21]

In fact, she was capable of great sensitivity and gentleness, evident in her loving nursing of Gopaler-ma, an elderly disciple of Ramakrishna who survived him by many years and for whom Nivedita always showed the most tender solicitude, as she did for Sarada Devi. But this was not the public face she exposed in pursuing the Indian cause.

Sister Nivedita published a good many books in her lifetime, some of the better-known being *Kali the Mother*, *The Web of Indian Life*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* (for children) and her hagiography of Vivekananda, *The Master as I Saw Him*. Of these only the last is still widely read. Nonetheless, in their day her writings did much to dispel some of the prejudices about Hinduism and India which were rampant in the West, and helped to awaken in Indians a renewed sense of pride in their own religious and cultural heritage. Such a purpose was also the motive-force in the work of Ananda Coomaraswamy whom she met in London. Later he was to commend Nivedita's *The Web of Indian Society* as one of the very few fair English-language accounts of the traditional social organization of India. He also praised her *Kali the Mother* where 'also for the first time the profound tenderness and terror of the Indian Mother-cult are presented to Western readers in such a manner as to reveal its true religious and social significance'.[22] In the last year of her life Nivedita was writing an ambitious work recounting the great Hindu myths of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. After her death Coomaraswamy took up this project, eventually publishing *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (1913) with Nivedita as co-author. Whilst Nivedita's books have largely faded from public view, interest in her life and work remains, as evidenced by the publication of Lizelle Raymond's *The Dedicated One: A Biography of Sister Nivedita* (1953), *The Long Journey Home: A Biography of Margaret Noble* (1975) by Barbara Foxe, and the appearance of two volumes of selected letters.[23] An Indian edition of her *Collected Works* in six volumes appeared mid-century.[24]

In her later years Nivedita became deeply interested in traditional Indian art and a ferocious critic, in both the Indian and English press, of the then widely held 'Hellenic theory' which postulated the Greek

origins of Indian art. Recall the episode in Kipling's *Kim* in the Lahore Museum where the lama 'in open-mouthed wonder' beholds 'the Greco-Buddhist sculptures done, savants know how long since, by forgotten workmen whose hands were feeling… for the mysteriously transmitted Grecian touch.'[25] It was left to Nivedita's friend Ananda Coomaraswamy finally to demolish the Hellenic theory in 1927, after pointing out in the course of his argument that

> …this [Hellenic] view was put forward, as M. Fouchet [one of its principal exponents] himself admits, in a manner best calculated to flatter the prejudices of European students and to offend the susceptibilities of Indians: the creative genius of Greece had provided a model which had later been barbarized and degraded by races devoid of true artistic instincts, to whom nothing deserving the name fine art could be credited.[26]

In the domain of the arts and crafts Sister Nivedita sought to reanimate traditional Indian ideals, in this campaign too fighting under the same banner as Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore:

> …we would remind all students of art that their true function is the revelation of the beautiful, the true, the good. It is not the fugitive moments of personal experience, but the eternal and universal, that best comes to the world through them.[27]

After Vivekananda's death Nivedita became more radically involved in resistance to British colonialism, to the extent that she was eventually threatened with imprisonment or deportation. In 1907 she went into a voluntary exile from her adopted country, returning to England to seek refuge 'in the lion's jaws', as one of her biographers out it.[28] In the next three years she lectured extensively in England, Europe and the USA, championing the cause of Indian independence and affirming India's cultural and religious heritage in the face of Western assumptions of superiority. She had previously withdrawn from public life for a period and had moved to Kurseong, near Darjeeling, to take up a more contemplative life as a 'forest-dweller'. But she was irresistibly drawn back into the vortex of political activism and controversy. After her travels in the West she returned to Darjeeling but the last year of her life was shadowed by illness and the apparent defeat of her most cherished projects: the

partition of Bengal had taken place; nationalist activities had been repressed and there was a hiatus in the independence movement, many of its leaders now in prison, hiding or exile; her school was foundering; attempts to establish the Ramakrishna Mission in England had thus far met with meagre success. She was not to know that all these vicissitudes were temporary and that she had sown many seeds which were to germinate in the following decades. She would have been surprised to know that in 1967, on the centenary of her birth, an Indian stamp was issued in her honour. However, she seemed to have reached the inner quietitude of the authentic *karma yogi*, attaining that detachment from the fruits of one's work which is so exalted in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Perhaps she returned in her final days to words she had written years before:

> If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.[29]

She died in Darjeeling in 1911 after contracting a fatal strain of dysentery. The epitaph on her tomb reads 'Here repose the ashes of Sister Nivedita, who gave her all for India'.

Principal Sources

Sister Nivedita's writings are best found in *The Master as I Saw Him* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1910) and *The Collected Works of Sister Nivedita*, 6 vols. (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, 1967-1975). The standard biography is Barbara Foxe's *Long Journey Home: A Biography of Margaret Noble* (London: Rider, 1975). Much useful background material can be found in Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974) and *Vedanta for Modern Man,* ed. Christopher Isherwood (New York: New American Library, 1972; first published 1945). See also sources listed at the end of the previous essay in this volume.

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1 'Sister Nivedita', *Wikipedia*. (Bhaskaracharaya was a 12thC astronomer and mathematician.)

2 B. Foxe, *Long Journey Home: A Biography of Margaret Noble*, 1975, 36.

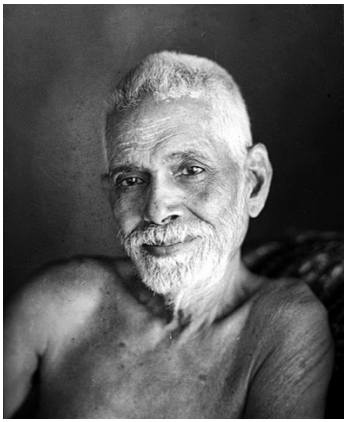
3 Ibid, 17.

4 Ibid, 21.
5 For a brief scholarly account of Vivekananda's life and work see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 228-246. The two most widely read books about Vivekananda in the West are Nivedita's own *The Master as I Saw Him* and Romain Rolland's *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*.
6 *Long Journey Home*, 19.
7 Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 1974, 324.
8 *Long Journey Home*, 37.
9 Ibid, 92.
10 From Pravrajika Atmaprana's *Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda* (1959), cited in 'Sister Nivedita', *Wikipedia*.
11 *Long Journey Home*, 82.
12 See *Long Journey Home*, 123-124.
13 Ibid, 127-128.
14 www.encyclopedia.com
15 *Long Journey Home,* 125. This last reference is to Professor Patrick Geddes, the British sociologist and participant in the Paris Congress of the History of Religions in 1900. Nivedita briefly assisted him with his work.
16 Christine Greenstidel, German by birth, American by citizenship and another of Vivekananda's Western disciples; see her 'Memories of Swami Vivekananda' in *Vedanta for the Modern World,* ed. C. Isherwood, New American Library, 1972, 156-175.
17 *Long Journey Home*, 166.
18 Ibid, 173.
19 Sister Nivedita; *libquotes.com*
20 *Long Journey Home*, 183.
21 Ibid, 166.
22 *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Durai Raja Singam & Joseph Fitzgerald, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011, 129.
23 A new edition of Nivedita's letters, first published in 1960, appeared in 2017 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu).
24 *The Collected Works of Sister Nivedita*, 6 vols., Calcutta: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, 1967-1975.
25 Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, 1927 edition, 8.
26 Coomaraswamy quoted in S.K. Abe, 'Inside the Wonder House', in *Curators of the Buddha*, ed. Donald Lopez Jr, Chicago, 1995, 81. For Coomaraswamy's final and decisive demolition of this theory see 'Origins of the Buddha Image' in the same volume. See also Coomaraswamy's 'The Influence of Greek on Indian Art', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 8:1, 1974, 42-50.
27 *Long Journey Home*, 200.
28 Lizelle Raymond, *The Dedicated One: A Biography of Sister Nivedita*, quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Princeton: 1977, 46.
29 Nivedita quoted in *Galaxy of Great Thoughts*, ed. M. Varatharajulu, Bloomsbury ebook.

Ramana Maharshi

1879-1950

'the incarnation of what is primordial
and incorruptible in India'



The man who prays, the prayer, and the God to whom he prays all have reality only as manifestations of the Self.

Early in 1949 the French monk Fr Henri Le Saux (soon to become known as Swami Abhishiktananda) visited Mt Arunachala, the linga-mountain of Lord Shiva and the earthly abode of Ramana Maharshi. He describes this encounter thus:

> Even before my mind was able to recognize the fact, and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonies awoke in my heart … In the Sage of Arunachala of our own time I discerned the unique Sage of eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.[1]

At this point Ramana was nearing the end of his mortal journey. For many years hence he had been recognized as a *Maharshi* ('great seer') and had been visited by countless seekers from both East and West. Unlike Ramakrishna and Anandamayi-ma, his repute had spontaneously spread far and wide in the Western world during his own lifetime. Many well-known figures had visited Arunachala to experience his powerful spiritual presence, among them Heinrich Zimmer, Marco Pallis, Somerset Maugham, Paul Brunton, Arthur Osborne, Ella Maillart, Swami Ramdas, Swami Yogananda, Mouni Sadhu, Swami Sivananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (the second President of India) and Moraji Desai (later Prime Minister of India). Mahatma Gandhi attempted to visit Ramana but was foiled by his disciples. During his visit to India Carl Jung was on the brink but foiled by his nervous apprehension that the encounter might subvert his own moorings in a Western worldview (as well it might!). What is striking about the many testimonies we have from such people, from all kinds of backgrounds, is their remarkable unanimity in recognizing Ramana as a extraordinary being of the highest spiritual attainment; this understanding was shared even by Westerners of a severely sceptical bent. Somerset Maugham, visiting India for a second time in 1938, was one such, later using Ramana as the model for the sage in his unexpectedly good novel of 1942, *The Razor's Edge*. (On the other hand, the rendition of the guru in Edmund Goulding's otherwise fine 1946 film adaptation of the novel, is quite ludicrous and as distant from Ramana as one can imagine.) From amongst the myriad accounts of Ramana, here is one more, this time from English policeman, cricketer and colonial administrator, Frank Humphreys, one of the Sage's earliest European devotees:

> On reaching the cave we sat before him, at his feet, and said nothing. We sat thus for a long time and I felt lifted out of myself. For half an hour I looked into the Maharishi's eyes, which never changed their expression of deep contemplation... The Maharishi is a man beyond description in his expression of dignity, gentleness, self-control and calm strength of conviction. You can imagine nothing more beautiful than his smile... It is strange what a change it makes in one to have been in his presence.[2]

Life

Ramana was born as Venkataraman Iyer in Tirichuli, a small village near the great temple city of Madurai, in the south Indian province of Tamil Nadu. He was the second son in a poor but pious Brahmin family. The first sixteen years of his life were more or less what we might expect of a village boy who was apparently distinguished only by a few unusual characteristics: he was a profoundly deep sleeper who could remain in that state despite being beaten and dragged about by his school friends, and he had a remarkable memory, evident in his effortless recall of many Tamil poems and hymns. He was strong and healthy, evinced little interest in his studies, moved with the rest of the family to Madurai when he was twelve, learned English at his new Hindu school before moving to the American Mission School where he became familiar with the teachings of Christianity. As a youth he developed a deepening interest in the local temple and those at Madurai where he experienced intermittent states of 'blissful consciousness'. (This fact subverts the frequently-made but ill-informed claim that the first sixteen years of his life were altogether 'a-religious'.) Venkataraman also, unaccountably, developed a fascination with Mt Arunachala and would become strangely agitated at its mention. He initially believed it to be an imaginary or mythical place: he was startled to discover that the mountain was a real and not too distant physical entity.

At the age of seventeen Venkataraman was, as it were, hit by a bolt of divine lightning. Sitting in his uncle's house, in a normal state and in good health, he was overwhelmed by a premonition of imminent death and felt his body go rigid, as if *rigor mortis* had already set in: 'Now death has come' he told himself, 'what does it mean?' He was undergoing an transformative death experience, what he later called *akrama mukti*, a 'sudden liberation', in perennialist terms a full-scale 'intellection'. Ramana described his illumination this way:

> Well this body now is dead. It will be carried to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the Body I? This body is silent and inert. But I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am deathless Spirit.[3]

The 'deathless Spirit' is the Self, the real 'I' as distinct from the egoic personality, and is not different from *Atman* and *Brahman*. Thus Venkataraman the village schoolboy, quite without any spiritual apprenticeship or formal religious training, was spontaneously transformed into *a jnanin*, a sage in full possession of gnosis, of divine wisdom, a living realisation of the teachings of the *Upanishads*. No doubt this will strike some readers as scarcely credible but by all traditional criteria this was a case of a spontaneous, unsolicited spiritual metamorphosis or transfiguration which took place outside any formal religious cadre. No guru, no initiation, no sustained and disciplined religious practice.

Now, generally speaking, in the words of Frithjof Schuon,

> Intellection has need of tradition, of a Revelation fixed in time and adapted to a society, if it is to be awakened in us and not go astray. . .. The importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realizing the Absolute must come 'objectively' from the Absolute; knowledge cannot spring up 'subjectively' except within the framework of an 'objective' divine formulation of Knowledge.[4]

However, Schuon concedes that

> There are no metaphysical or cosmological reasons why *in exceptional cases* direct intellection should not occur in men who have no link at all with revealed wisdom; but an exception, though it proves the rule, certainly cannot create it.[5]

Ramana provides us with just such a case of the 'isolated miracle', the exception which proves but, assuredly, does not constitute the rule. Furthermore, as we shall see, Schuon's insistence on the existence of an traditional religious framework is verified, so to speak, by Ramana's subsequent recourse to the teachings and the vocabulary of Advaita Vedanta.

Following his awakening Ramana lost all interest in his previous preoccupations and pastimes, became quite indifferent to his physical surroundings, spent many hours in meditation, and visited the temple daily where the images of the deities would spontaneously trigger profuse tears. He seemed to take on a new 'personality' in which humility and equilibrium were paramount. After getting into

strife at school for neglecting his studies he resolved to set out for Arunachala. After a difficult and hazardous trip he arrived at the holy mountain on the festival day dedicated to Krishna. He threw his few remaining coins into the temple pool and was washed clean by a sudden downpour. Although he did not go through the formal ceremony to become a *sannyasi* he was now a fully fledged renunciate who was to devote all his energies to the spiritual life, remaining in the precinct of the holy mountain for the rest of his life.

Six months after his arrival at Arunachala he was visited by Alagammal, his distressed mother. Much weeping and entreaty but to no avail, he was not to be moved. Some years later she again visited him, soon falling desperately ill. Ramana himself nursed her back to health, and prayed for her full awakening. After the death of her youngest son, she moved back to Arunachala permanently, donned the renunciate's ochre robe, took charge of the kitchen and spent the last six years of her life there before her death in 1922. Ramana subsequently visited her shrine daily. Eventually a large ashram, including a library, hospital, and post office as well as other amenities, was built over the tomb. The saint observed that this was not a matter of his personal volition or preference but in obedience to the Divine Will. Ramana himself was closely involved in the design and building of the new ashram.

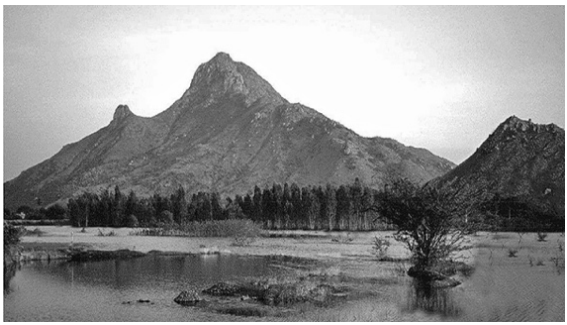
Soon after Alagammal's first visit Ramana entered several years of complete silence, living in a mangrove orchard in the ashram precinct before moving into a cave on the slopes of the mountain. He was by this time recognized as saintly person with a powerful *darsan*. Eventually he came to be known as Bhagwan Sri Ramana Maharshi, so proclaimed by one of his earliest devotees, a renowned Vedic scholar. In the fullness of time Ramana was persuaded to move back to the ashram where he started speaking again and giving teachings though he never sought out disciples or proclaimed himself a guru:

> I do not consider anyone to be my disciple. I have never sought *upadesa* [spiritual instruction or initiation] from anyone nor do I give ceremonial *upadesa*. If the people call themselves my disciples I do not approve or disapprove.[6]

More often than not Ramana simply sat in silence ('silence is eloquence unceasing') while pilgrims and devotees gathered at his feet. His fame spread rapidly and an ever-increasing number of people of all sorts came in the hope of being in his presence. The

ashram became ever more closely identified with him, becoming a monastery, a pilgrimage site, a seat of religious learning and a publication centre. Without any encouragement on Ramana's part a devotional cult grew up around him and many stories about the sage circulated throughout India. Ramana himself remained aloof from the hoopla surrounding him as a religious celebrity, only taking pains to repudiate ill-found stories about his fabulous powers and attainments. Eventually several centres devoted to Ramana opened in the West but these were very few in number compared to the rapid proliferation of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda centres which followed the death of the Bengali saint and the establishment of the Ramakrishna Order.

Since his youth Ramana had felt a powerful mystical attraction to the holy mountain of Arunachala, closely associated with the Saivite tradition and with the great 8thC sage and metaphysician, Sankara. Ramana spent twenty years living on the mountain to which he wrote devotional hymns and which he acclaimed as his guru. He knew no other. Arunachala, he said, was an earthly manifestation of the Immovable, the One Reality, the Self – in theistic terms, God.



Mt Arunachala

Ramana's 'lifestyle', if such a crude term be permitted, was one of extreme simplicity and frugality. He attended to various daily chores around the ashram, helping in the kitchen, stitching together the bamboo leaves from which the monks and visitors ate their meals, peeling vegetables and taking on other humble tasks. He had a remarkable affinity with animals, treating them with the same courtesy and respect he extended to humans. Many creatures seemed strangely attracted to him and a whole menagerie of birds, monkeys,

cows and dogs took up residence close to his quarters. Laksmi the cow was a particular favourite. There were many tigers in the district, often throwing villagers into a state of panic and hysterical fear. Ramana's disciples recount a story of the sage walking in the forest, encountering a tiger whom he politely greeted with unruffled equanimity. A complete fearlessness in all circumstances was a hallmark of his character.

After more than a half of century of living, working and teaching at Arunachala Ramana fell ill, developing a cancerous growth on his arm. The doctors wanted to amputate his arm to which Ramana replied, 'There is no need for alarm. The body is itself a disease. Let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? Simple dressing of the affected part will do'. On the evening of April 14th, 1950, he asked his attendants to help him sit up, and gave *darsan* to those disciples who were present. All sang a hymn of praise to Arunachala, composed by the saint himself. Ramana passed out of his body without any struggle, death rattle or any of the other normal symptoms of the death process. It is said that a comet flared over the holy mountain at the moment of his death.

Teaching and Writing

Ramana, both before and after his realisation, did little formal religious study though he did read a few Puranas, the lives of Tamil saints, some of the *Upanishads*, and the Bible. As an adult he read some traditional texts, not to discover something he did not already know, but to familiarize himself with the metaphysical vocabulary in which the rishis had articulated the Upanishadic doctrines about the nature of Reality, the Self, the universe, the human individual and so on. This equipped him with a doctrinal schema within which he could communicate what he already knew by direct experience. The Maharishi wrote very little and only when directly requested to do so. His works comprise a very modest corpus: some devotional hymns to Arunachala and a small collection of other verses, *Upadesa Saram* ('Essence of the Teaching') and *Sat Darsama Bhaysya* ('An Explanation of the Vision of Reality'), all these comprising less than a hundred pages in Arthur Osborne's *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi.* Beyond these there are Ramana's translations of traditional texts. There are notes by his disciples recording some of his talks and dialogues, as well as the inevitable welter of commentaries – some of which would no doubt have astonished him!

The governing theme of Ramana's teaching was the affirmation of the identity of *Atman-Brahman*, the non-duality of the Real, the illusory nature of the world, and the insistence that self-inquiry (*vicara*) was the path to a unitive plenary experience available to all. Self-inquiry entailed a serious confrontation with the question 'Who am I?', a question which subsumed all others. Moreover, he said, 'The question "Who am I?" is not really meant to get an answer, the question "Who am I? " is meant to dissolve the questioner.' However, this inquiry, culminating in self-naughting, must not be identified with cerebration, with mental activity as we normally understand it. As one scholar has glossed Ramana's teaching, 'Self-investigation is not any action or activity of our mind, but is only the practice of keeping the mind perpetually subsided in our real self, that is, in our own essential and ever clearly self-conscious being.'[7]

The formal answer to the question 'Who am I?', in traditional Vedantic terms, is 'That [Brahman/Self] I Am' (*not*, it should be noted, 'I am That'). Ramana: 'I Am is the name of God. Of all the definitions of God, none is indeed so well put as the Biblical statement "I Am that I Am" in *Exodus*.' The true 'I' is the Self, totally independent of the structural functionings of the psycho-physical organism and its organizing ego (thinking, feeling, reflecting, remembering etc – the whole 'bureaucracy of the ego', as Chögyam Trungpa called it) which is mistaken for the 'I'. The egoic 'self' is illusory. The nature of the true Self is *sat-cit-ananda* (being-consciousness-bliss). He stressed that *'Realisation is not acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only removal of all camouflage.'* In rehearsing the ancient non-dualistic teaching of the Vedanta Ramana usually deployed a Socratic method, turning the question back on his interlocuter. Eg: To the seeker's question 'Who is God?' Ramana responds 'Who are you?' He declares that 'The enquiry "Who am I?" is the principal means to the removal of all misery and the attainment of the supreme bliss.'

Ramana himself, as we have seen, was a *jnanin* who came by his understanding of the Self spontaneously and without any ostensible effort on his part. But he was well aware that such an awakening, 'the isolated miracle', was a rare event, and that the vast majority of seekers need to tread a spiritual path.

> One of two things must be done. Either surrender because you admit your inability and require a higher power to help you, or investigate the cause of misery by going to the

> source and merging into the Self. Either way you will be free from misery. God never forsakes one who has surrendered.

All the traditional methods could be useful in preparing for the final insight: devotions, chanting, breath control, service to others, austerities, and so on. He particularly emphasized the efficacy of three methods: *puja* (worship) and ritual observances which purified the body; chanting and prayer which prepared the voice; and meditation which stilled and clarified the mind. All spiritual practice is a means to the final end, the realisation of the nature of the Self, dependent on breaking our identification with the body and the ego, the small 'self':

> Know that the eradication of the identification with the body is charity, spiritual austerity and ritual sacrifice; it is virtue, divine union and devotion; it is heaven, wealth, peace and truth; it is grace; it is the state of divine silence; it is the deathless death; it is *jnana*, renunciation, final liberation and bliss.

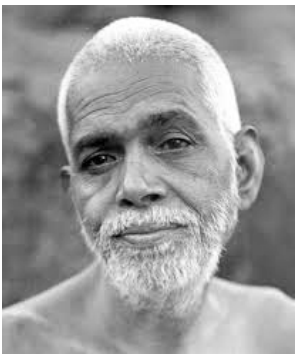
Ramana was frequently asked questions about social reform to which his reply was always the same: 'Your own Self-Realisation is the greatest service you can render the world.'

Comparison with Ramakrishna

Given the fact that two of the greatest saints of modern India (along with Anandamayi-ma) were Ramakrishna and Ramana, almost universally recognized, a few comparisons of these two towering figures may be in order. The Bengali saint's genius was manifest in a spiritual plasticity which enabled him to immerse himself in all sorts of spiritual modalities, drawn not only from the multicoloured traditions of India but from those of the Occident as well, to fathom their depths and to 'verify' their validity as paths to God. Ramakarishna was like a living compendium of the divergent branches of Hinduism as well as being the first great religious figure to existentially 'validate' the teachings and practices of foreign religious traditions. Moreover, he was essentially a *bhaktin* whose spiritual personality was most readily expressed in devotion to the deities (Kali and Rama pre-eminently), while Ramana was a pure *jnanin* who never externalized his devotion to a deity, only to his 'guru', Mt Arunachala. Ramakrishna was a complex, volatile,

unpredictable character who often scandalized his contemporaries; Ramana exhibited a simplicity and purity of character, and a stillness and equilibrium such as we might expect of a great Zen Master. He was the distillation of Vedantic spirituality. Ramana could have appeared at any time; he might easily have been a contemporary of Sankara, the greatest sage in the whole Hindu tradition. Ramakrishna, on the other hand, is a figure who appeared providentially at a certain juncture in history when both his own religious heritage and the Abrahamic traditions of the West were threatened by the insidious forces of modernity, and in whom we can discern some of the tensions and contradictions of the era. Some of these considerations are elaborated in Schuon's summation of the significance of Ramana, providing us with an eloquent conclusion to this modest conspectus:

> In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets ancient and eternal India again. Vedantic truth – that of the *Upanishads* – is reduced to its simplest expression without any betrayal: it is the simplicity inherent in the Real, not the artificial and quite external simplification that springs from ignorance. The spiritual function that consists in an 'action of presence' found its most rigorous expression in the Maharishi. In these latter days Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation of what is primordial and incorruptible in India in opposition to modern activism: he manifested the nobility of contemplative 'nonaction' in opposition to an ethic of utilitarian agitation, and he showed the implacable beauty of pure truth in opposition to passions, weaknesses, betrayals.



Principal Sources

For Ramana's own writings see *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, ed. Arthur Osborne (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasrama, 1979, fifth edition). Perhaps the best introduction is T.M.P. Mahadevan's, *Ramana Maharshi, the Sage of Arunachala* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1977). A short but profound assessment of Ramana (and Ramakrishna) can be found in Frithjof Schuon's essay, 'The Vedanta' in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007). See also Mateus Soares de Azevedo's essay 'Frithjof Schuon and Sri Ramana Maharshi' in *Sacred Web* 10 (online). One of the most searching works on the sage is Patrick Laude's *Surrendering to the Self: Ramana Maharshi's Message for the Present* (London; Hurst & Co, 2022) in which he argues that Ramana provides us with a bridge which, so to say, dissolves the apparent opposition between modern understandings of 'religion' and 'spirituality'. Laude's dense and challenging book gives us the most penetrating Western explication of various aspects of the Maharishi's life and teaching.

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1 Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunachala: A Christian Hermit on Shiva's Holy Mountain*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, 9.

2 Humphreys quoted in T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi: The Sage of Arunachala*, 1977, 48.

3 T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi*, 18.

4 Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 2011, 130.

5 Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 2007, 10. Elsewhere Schuon even more emphatically states that 'It is altogether erroneous to believe that religion in the ordinary sense of the term… is the indispensable condition and sole guarantee of intellectual intuition and of the practical consequences derived from it'; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 'Appendix: Selections from Letters and Other Previously Unpublished Writings', 237.

6 Most of the direct quotes from Ramana are taken from the *Good Reads* website. Most of the biographical facts are taken from Mahadevan's book.

7 From Michael James, *Happiness and the Art of Being: An introduction to the philosophy and practice of the teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, 2006, quoted in Patrick Laude, *Surrender to the Self*, 2022, 3.

ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL

1868-1969

intrepid explorer

I craved to go beyond the garden gate, to follow the road that passed it by, and to set out for the Unknown.[1]

After a flamboyant career in France as student anarchist, opera singer, journalist, theosophist, freemason, feminist, and adventurer, Alexandra David-Néel was introduced to the scholarly study of Buddhism at the Sorbonne in the first decade of the new century. According to some accounts she had converted to Buddhism in 1889, at the age of twenty-one, but how serious this 'conversion' was remains unclear. In any event, her teachers at the Sorbonne included the eminent Orientalists Sylvain Levi and Edouard Foucaux, the latter introducing her to Tibetan Buddhist texts. She had made her first trip to the East in 1891, to Ceylon and India, where she received some instruction in the Vedanta. She also visited Hanoi as part of a touring opera company. After producing a well-received book, *The Buddhism of the Buddha and Buddhist Modernism*, David-Néel set out again for India in 1911, with serious intent:

> There are great men at the Sorbonne, who know all the roots of the words and the historical dates, but I wish to live philosophy on the spot and undergo physical and spiritual training, not just read about them.[2]

She was one of the earliest in a long line of seekers for whom bookish learning was only a prelude to a more direct engagement with Eastern spirituality. In 1904 David-Néel had married Philippe Néel de Saint-Sauveur, an engineer and distant relative. He was somewhat baffled by her interest in Buddhism but he funded her trip, perhaps imagining that a spell in the East would get her Buddhist preoccupation 'out of her system'. He would not have been altogether reassured when she wrote to him from Tibet:

> Each day I find myself further from the illusions and agitations [of the Western world]. A great repose, a great illumination enters into me, or rather, I enter into them… You have a wife who carries your name with dignity… With your support and aid I shall become an author of renown'.[3]

And so it happened. This sojourn in Asia, undertaken in middle-age, was to last fourteen years. It effectively meant an end to her marriage for she was thenceforth very rarely to spend any time with her husband. She later wrote to him, 'I believe you are the only person in the world for whom I have a feeling of attachment, but I am not made for married life'.[4]

We cannot here retrace David-Néel's many peregrinations through ashrams, temples, monasteries, shrines and centers of learning in the subcontinent, in the Tibeto-Himalayan regions, Siberia, Southeast Asia and China – but she had adventures aplenty. She interviewed the thirteenth Dalai Lama, was befriended by the Crown Prince of Sikkim, studied Tibetan doctrines with Lama Dawa Kazi-Samdup, and adopted a novice Kargyu monk in Sikkim, Yongden, who was to remain her constant companion until his death in 1955.[5] She spent a harsh Tibetan winter in a cave under the tutelage of a reclusive *gomchen* who conferred on her the name 'Lamp of Wisdom'. David-Néel became highly fluent in Tibetan, spent three years in the monastic citadel of Kumbum, home to more than 3000 monks, and undertook enthusiastic studies of all aspects of the Vajrayana. She translated several important texts, practised various austerities and mastered the technique of *tummo* whereby one generates internal body heat, and spent extended periods in meditation retreats.

In her fifty-fifth year, disguised as a Tibetan beggar-woman and accompanied by Yongden, she embarked on her most famous

expedition, the journey to Lhasa, 2000 miles on foot, achieving a goal that had defied many intrepid travellers throughout the 19th century. In fact, the French priests Huc and Gabet and the eccentric Englishman Thomas Manning were the *only* European visitors to Lhasa during the whole of the 19th century. Amongst those who had failed to reach the Tibetan capital were the Russian explorer Prejevalsky in 1879 and the Swede Sven Hedin in 1898, as well as several American and English travellers.[6] David-Néel's account of this journey and of her two months in Lhasa (described in distinctly anti-romantic terms) has recently been challenged as a fabrication but the case against her is flimsy in the extreme.[7] No doubt David-Néel herself played a significant part in creating her own legend – her biographers have had the devil's own job in separating fact and fiction in her multifarious writings[8] – but she was certainly neither a fraud nor a credulous sentimentalist.

David-Néel travelled extensively throughout Asia in the years 1911-1924 before returning to France where she purchased a house in Digne-les-Bains, in Provence. There she established a hermitage and lamaist shrine, one of the earliest Tibetan Buddhist footholds in Europe, and wrote a series of books including *My Journey to Lhasa* (1927), *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (1931), and *Initiates and Initiations in Tibet* (1931). Her other substantial work in this field, *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*, appeared in 1967, and was first published in English by the Beat poet and bookseller Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

In 1937, at the age of sixty-nine, she returned to Asia where she spent the next decade, including a period in Siberia, an eighteen-month journey through China during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and a five-year retreat in Tibet. Throughout these years she was accompanied by Yongden. During her twenty-five years of travels in Tibet and the Far East David-Néel visited countless monasteries, shrines, temples and sacred sites, and encountered many religious leaders, scholars and adepts. As well as the figures already mentioned, others included Sri Aurobindo, Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna's widow), the Panchen Lama, Nyanatiloka Thera, Lama Anagarika Govinda, and the doyen of Zen studies, the Japanese scholar DT Suzuki.

After her final return to Europe in 1946 David-Néel was showered with honours, and became a popular lecturer and prolific writer on Eastern subjects. She spent the last years of her life in

Monaco. Befitting such an indomitable explorer, David-Néel lived on until 1969, her one hundred and first year.

As one scholar has recently observed, 'The representation of Tibetan Buddhism historically has been and continues to be situated in a domain where the scholarly and the popular commingle, a domain that is neither exclusively one or the other.'[9] Alexandra David-Néel's writings illustrate the point, occupying a position somewhere between those of the popular theosophists/occultists on one flank and the more sober (though often misinformed) works of Orientalist scholars on the other. David-Néel herself is often relegated to the ranks of 'women adventurers' – this despite the production of some forty-odd books, several of which have wielded an extraordinary influence. Her absence from the annals of Orientalist scholarship is to be explained, perhaps, by the fact that her writings are an idiosyncratic admixture of autobiography, travelogue, scholarship and, according to her detractors, fantasy.[10] Her books have been disparaged by both practitioners and scholars. John Blofeld, for instance, wrote that, 'David-Néel was so deeply concerned with her public image that her most widely read books are limited to Tibetan Buddhism's popular aspects. Little is said about its spiritually or philosophically profound aspects.'[11] The occultists and esotericists, for their part, are often out of sympathy with the rational and sceptical aspects of David-Néel's sensibility.[12]

Whatever one might make of the contradictory claims made about David-Néel, the tangible achievements remain, and many have found intellectual and spiritual nourishment in her work and inspiration in her example, several of the Beat writers of the 50s, Alan Watts, Lama Govinda, and Peter Matthiessen among them. Not without reason did Lawrence Durrell call her 'the most astonishing woman of our time'.[13] Unlike most of her predecessors she believed that the only way to understand the spiritual economy of the Tibetans was to live amongst the common people as one of them.[14] Her close familiarity with ordinary folk in the Tibeto-Himalayan regions, her mastery of Tibetan, her lengthy studies under authentic teachers, her austerities and sustained meditational practice, and her residence in several great monasteries all qualified her to speak and write about the mysteries of the religious heritage. Her now well-known accounts of such alien practices as divination or *lung-gom-pa* gather more weight when we remember that David-Néel thought of herself as an orthodox Buddhist who abhorred superstition of any kind.

Nonetheless, she was able to approach strange religious practices with an open mind and a sympathetic receptivity. One of her contemporaries, Professor A. d'Arsonval, wrote of her thus:

> This Easterner, this complete Tibetan, has remained a Westerner, a disciple of Descartes and of Claude Bernard, practicing the philosophical scepticism of the former which, according to the latter, should be the constant ally of the scientific observer. Madame David-Néel has observed everything in Tibet in a free and impartial spirit.[15]

The claim may be naïve but certainly David-Néel cannot be dismissed as either gullible or simple-minded. Her achievements and significance have been nicely summarized by David Guy:

> David-Néel was famous as an adventuress, but that description doesn't seem adequate to her real accomplishments. She left behind voluminous writings… and these are authentic not just because of her scholarship, but because of her lifelong practice. A woman who spent years in a mountain hermitage, who sat in meditation halls with thousands of lamas, who studied languages and scoured libraries for original teachings, who traveled for many years and for thousands of miles to immerse herself in a culture which few people had ever even heard of, writes with far more insight than someone who has only read about such experiences. It is her devotion to Buddhism and her willingness to trace it to its source that are finally most impressive about her life.[16]

No doubt her accounts of Tibetan doctrines and practices, and of the culture at large, need to be treated with some caution; nevertheless, drawing on her vast reserve of *lived experience*, they contain much that is well-informed, lively and illuminating. We would be much the poorer without them.

Principal Sources

David-Néel's most significant works are mentioned in the main text. The most sympathetic biography is by Ruth Middleton, *Alexandra David-Néel: Portrait of an Adventurer* (Shambhala, 1989) but there is much interesting material in Barbara & Michael Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Néel* (Overlook Press, 1998.) David Guy's essay in *Tricycle*, Fall 1995, is a useful introduction, as are the *Wikipedia* entry and Part III of Luree Miller's *On Top of the World: Five Women Explorers in Tibet* (The Mountaineers, 1984).

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1 *Wikiquote.* Photo: AD-N with Yongden.

2 David-Néel quoted in Luree Miller, *On Top of the World*, 1989, 145.

3 Letter quoted in David Guy, 'Alexandra David-Néel', *Tricycle: the Buddhist Review*, Fall 1995 (online).

4 David Guy, 'Alexandra David-Néel'.

5 Some have suggested that Yongden was not only David-Néel's adopted son but also her lover. No persuasive evidence for such a claim.

6 See Peter Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place*, 1983, 1.

7 See B. & M. Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Néel*, 1998, 225-234. (Fraudulent travel accounts comprise a distinct sub-genre of Victorian literature: its Tibetan branch is perhaps best represented by Henry Savage Landor's *In the Forbidden Land*, 1898.)

8 The two most recent biographies are those by the Fosters (already cited) and Ruth Middleton's *Alexandra David-Néel: Portrait of an Adventurer*, 1989. (Although the Fosters have a taste for the lurid and the sensational, their biography is more robust and critical than Middleton's.)

9 Donald Lopez Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 1998, 110.

10 For instance, there is no mention of her in J.J. Clarke's *Oriental Enlightenment* or Donald Lopez Jr's *Prisoners of Shangri-La* although she is clearly more significant than many of the figures they do discuss.

11 Blofeld cited in B. & M. Foster, *Secret Lives*, 299 (source uncited).

12 The dates are of the first English translations. For bibliographical information on books by and about David-Néel see B. & M. Foster, *Secret Lives,* 310-319.

13 B. & M. Foster, *Secret Lives*, xxi.

14 See Luree Miller, *On Top of the World*, 171-172.

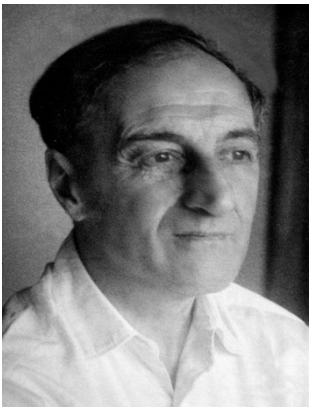
15 Ibid, 186.

16 David Guy, 'Alexandra David-Néel'.

MARCO PALLIS

1895-1989

mountaineer, musician, perennialist philosopher



In the Tibet we visited while the traditional order was still intact the whole landscape was as if suffused by the message of the Buddha's Dhamma ... there were times when a man might have been forgiven for supposing himself already present in the Pure Land.[1]

Marco Pallis was born of Orthodox Greek parents in Liverpool in 1895. His father Alexander was a partner in the British branch of Ralli Brothers, a Greek trading company. The Pallis family had, in earlier days, lived in India for many years and the family home was adorned with works of Oriental craftsmanship, inspiring in young Marco 'an affinity for Oriental, especially Indian, history and art dating back to childhood.'[2] He was educated at Harrow and Liverpool University, and while still a teenager served as medical orderly for the Salvation Army in the Balkan wars of 1912-13. He later enlisted in the British army and was wounded in the Great War. After war's end Pallis had both the time and the resources (a very substantial advance on his inheritance) to pursue the three great passions which were to shape his life thenceforth: music, mountaineering and the study of the great religious traditions of both East and West, this last interest soon to focus on the Buddhist heritage of Tibet.

By the mid-20s Pallis was studying with Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940), the eminent French musicologist who was dedicated to the revival of early English music and who had established a studio in Haselmere, Surrey. Dolmetsch's circle of friends and collaborators encompassed many of the major literary and artistic figures of the period – William Morris, GB Shaw, Ezra Pound, WB Yeats and others.[3] Dolmetsch's approach, Pallis tells us, was shaped by 'a radical rejection of the idea of "progress", as applied to the arts, at a time when the rest of the musical profession took this for granted.'[4] Under Dolmetsch, Pallis discovered what was to become his lifelong love for the viola de gamba. It was also at Dolmetsch's studio, in 1926, that Pallis met the talented viol and harpsichord player Richard Nicholson (1905-1995) who had been an organ scholar at Queen's College, Oxford. They became lifelong partners. Some time later, following their travels in the East, the two friends formed 'The English Consort of Viols', a group dedicated to the preservation of early English music. Pallis made several concert tours with this group. On one such tour to the U.S.A. he met Thomas Merton with whom he had already opened a correspondence.[5] Late in his life the Royal Academy of Music awarded Pallis an honorary membership in recognition of his lifelong devotion to the preservation of Renaissance music. At the time of his death Pallis, in his ninety-fifth year, was working on an opera based on the life of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa.

Another lasting benefit of the association with Dolmetsch was Pallis' early exposure to the work of the Anglo-Ceylonese savant, Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was known personally to the musicologist. It was also at Haselmere that Pallis first encountered the works of the great French metaphysician, René Guénon, who was to become the most decisive influence in his intellectual and spiritual development. William Stoddart, a fellow-perennialist, provides us with a useful capsule statement of Guénon's philosophy:

> Guénon's main ideas were: universal and traditional metaphysics, and also the notion of intrinsic orthodoxy, coupled with the role of symbolism, the science of forms ... [a] principled and detailed critique of the modern world ... in contrast with all great civilisations of the world, modern 'civilisation', having no religious origin or centre, was a deviation and an anomaly, and that we are now living in what Hindus call the *Kali-Yuga*, the 'Dark Age' which precedes the end of the cycle or the 'end of the world'.[6]

Pallis was receptive to such ideas. They furnished 'documented and reasoned' confirmation of his own childhood intuition that 'the West enjoyed no innate superiority over the East, rather did the balance of evidence lean, for me, the other way'.[7] As Poul Pederson has observed, it was at Haslemere that Pallis 'formed the *Weltanschauung* that guided him for the rest of his life.'[8]

In the years following the war, and despite a serious knee injury sustained during his military service, Pallis became an intrepid mountaineer, often climbing in Snowdonia, the Peak District, the Scottish Highlands, the Dolomites and the Swiss Alps as well as undertaking an exploratory trip to the Arctic. Pallis was attracted not only by the physical and psychological challenges of mountaineering but by the allure of pristine nature and by the many affinities between mountaineering and spiritual wayfaring, a theme which he was later to elaborate in some depth and which informs the title of the book in which the two pursuits were to find a magical synthesis: *The Way and the Mountain* (1960). Eventually the experience of climbing 'extended itself to the point of opening the door, not only to unspoiled Nature, but also of the traditional world in one of its most intact forms, that of Tibetan Buddhism, truly a far-flung wayfaring'.[9]

In 1933 Pallis joined a mountaineering expedition to the Kinnaur region of the Himalayas, politically part of what is now the northern Indian province of Himalchal Pradesh but at that time still ethnically and culturally predominantly Tibetan. The group made the first ascent of Leo Pargial (6816m), a feat often referred to in the mountaineering literature of the Himalayas. His initial contact with Tibetans, hired as porters, prompted this prescient reflection: 'our recent contact with its people, their fine sturdy character, and their ideas had forged a bond between us and Tibet that was destined to influence us in the future more profoundly than we dreamed of.'[10]

He returned to the Himalayas in 1936, now consumed by an interest in Tibet's traditional culture. On this expedition the party tackled Mt Simvu in Sikkim but were undone by the early onset of the monsoon (ever the bane of Himalayan climbers). An even more bitter disappointment was their failure to penetrate Tibet itself, a planned pilgrimage thwarted when they were refused permission to enter the country. Pallis recalls the experience in *Peaks and Lamas*:

> We could just make out lines of rolling purple hills that seemed to belong to another world, a world of austere

> calm, of deserted plateaux and colourful downs, which made the snowy Himalaya seem strangely young and assertive. It was a corner of Tibet. My eyes rested on it with an intensity of longing. I sometimes wondered whether I should ever be privileged to approach the vision any closer. Tibet is well guarded, as it should be; nor is it always easy to distinguish between the genuine seeker after knowledge and the charlatan or the sensation-monger intent on 'getting into Tibet' merely because of its reputation as a closed and mysterious land.[11]

Nonetheless, the trip was to yield some providential benefits through Pallis' meeting with the Nyingma lama of Lachen, a magnetic *gomchen* (great hermit) who had already exercised a profound influence on two other early Western seekers in the Tibeto-Himalayan regions, Alexandra David-Néel and Ernst Hoffman who became Lama Anagarika Govinda. The meeting with the lama steeled the resolve of Pallis and Nicholson to fully immerse themselves in Tibetan Buddhism and they soon embarked on a lengthy visit to the remote Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh where they could experience the traditional way of life.

Pallis returned for a third and more extended visit after the second World War when he lived and studied under Tibetan lamas near Shigatse and was initiated into one of the lineages with the Tibetan name of Thubden Tendzin.[12] On his way to Tibet in 1947 Pallis visited René Guénon in Cairo. He had already, with Nicholson, translated two of Guénon's books. He also visited Ceylon and South India, receiving the *darsan* of Ramana Maharshi at Tiravunnamalai. Whilst in India and Sikkim Pallis kept a protective eye on Ananda Coomaraswamy's son Rama who had been sent to India to study Hindi and Sanskrit. Pallis never met the elder Coomaraswamy but maintained a friendly correspondence with him and enlisted his aid in persuading Guénon to reconsider his dismissive attitude to Buddhism which he had hitherto regarded as an aberrant heterodoxy.

Pallis was one of a small group of Westerners who had the privilege of experiencing the traditional culture of Tibet in its eventide. He was drawn there by his love of mountaineering and, no doubt, by impulses which at the time he himself could only sense as through a glass darkly.

> In the Tibet we visited while the traditional order was still intact the whole landscape was as if suffused by the message of the Buddha's Dharma; it came to one with the air one breathed, birds seemed to sing of it, mountain streams hummed its refrain as they bubbled across the stones, a dharmic perfume seemed to rise from every flower … there were times when a man might have been forgiven for supposing himself already present in the Pure Land. The India of King Ashoka's time must have been something like this; to find it in mid-twentieth century anywhere was something of a wonder.[13]

Pallis was to be one of the most eloquent witnesses of the calamity which afflicted his spiritual homeland, one of a small handful of Westerners who alerted the rest of the world to the magnitude of the tragedy which was unfolding in Tibet.

> One can truly say that this remote land behind the snowy rampart of the Himalaya had become like the chosen sanctuary for all those things whereof the historical discarding had caused our present profane civilisation, the first of its kind, to come into being … The violation of this sanctuary and the dissipation of the sacred influences concentrated there became an event of properly cosmic significance, of which the ulterior consequences for a world which tacitly condoned the outrage or, in many cases, openly countenanced it on the plea that it brought 'progress' to a reluctant people, have yet to ripen.[14]

The recent history of Tibet exemplifies the fate of traditional civilisations in the modern world. Tibet had stood as one of the last bastions of a way of life which properly deserved to be called traditional – one directed, in the first place, not to a godless ideal of material 'progress' but to the spiritual welfare of its people, a culture which, in TS Eliot's phrase, was an incarnation of the religious outlook which informed it. As Pallis stresses, Tibet served as a haven for all those principles and ideals, all those aspirations of the human spirit, which were elsewhere being violated by the forces of modernity. That the invasion of Tibet and the destruction of its religious culture should be carried out by its neighbour in the name of a profane Western ideology is one of the most bitter ironies of recent history. Let us not mince words: the systematic subversion of

Tibet's religious heritage, the slaughter of its monks and nuns, the sacking of the monasteries, the unceasing violation of human rights, the cynical 'population policy' to make Tibetans a minority in their own land, and the desecration of the environment, make the Chinese occupation an imperial vandalism no less appalling than that of the Western powers in so many different parts of the globe in the preceding century. No one has written on this subject more eloquently than Lama Anagarika Govinda who, like Pallis, was able to visit Tibet in the last days before its violation. It is worth quoting him at some length in a passage which Pallis would no doubt have fervently endorsed:

> Why is it that the fate of Tibet has found such a deep echo in the world? There can only be one answer: Tibet has become the symbol of all that present-day humanity is longing for, either because it has been lost or not yet been realised or because it is in danger of disappearing from human sight: the stability of a tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man, in whose depth this past is enshrined as an ever-present source of inspiration.
>
> But more than that: what is happening in Tibet is symbolical for the fate of humanity. As on a gigantically raised stage we witness the struggle between two worlds, which may be interpreted, according to the standpoint of the spectator, either as the struggle between the past and the future, between backwardness and progress, belief and science, superstition and knowledge or as the struggle between spiritual freedom and material power, between the wisdom of the heart and the knowledge of the brain, between the dignity of the human individual and the herd-instinct of the mass, between the faith in the higher destiny of man through inner development and the belief in material prosperity through an ever-increasing production of goods.
>
> We witness the tragedy of a peaceful people without political ambitions and with the sole desire to be left alone, being deprived of its freedom and trampled underfoot by a powerful neighbour in the name of 'progress', which as ever must serve as a cover for all the brutalities of the human race. The living present is sacrificed to the moloch

> of the future, the organic connection with a fruitful past is destroyed for the chimera of a machine-made prosperity.[15]

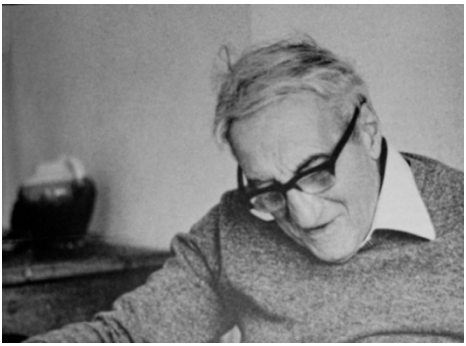
There are those who make much of the various social abuses and corruptions which, as the present Dalai Lama has conceded, were to be found in Tibet on the eve of the Chinese invasion, as if these could in any measure justify the monstrous brutalities which were to follow. On the other hand, there is nothing to be gained from that sentimental romanticism and nostalgia for the exotic which paints traditional Tibet as a pristine Utopia. Marco Pallis did not fall into either trap. In an Appendix to *Peaks and Lamas* and in his Foreword to Chögyam Trungpa's *Born in Tibet* he acknowledged various ills in traditional Tibet and situated them in their proper context. Pallis was well aware of the following admonition of Frithjof Schuon whose writings proved such an inspiration for his own work:

> When the modern world is contrasted with traditional civilisations, it is not simply a question of seeking the good things and the bad things on one side or the other; good and evil are everywhere, so that it is essentially a question of knowing on which side the more important good and on which side the lesser evil is to be found. If someone says that such and such a good exists outside tradition, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the most important good, and it is necessarily represented by tradition; and if someone says that in tradition there exists such and such an evil, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the lesser evil, and again it is tradition that embodies it. It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.[16]

No one with any sense of proportion can for a moment doubt that the good in Tibet's traditional civilisation far outweighed the bad, and that something infinitely precious and irreplaceable was destroyed forever by the invading juggernaut.

The peculiar character of Tibetan civilisation stemmed from the creative fusion of the indigenous shamanistic tradition of Bön-po with the Mahayana Buddhism brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava and the monks of India. From this spiritual intercourse sprang forth the Vajrayana, that luminous and flamboyant form of Buddhism which expressed the religious genius of the Tibetan people and which

seemed to draw its inspiration from the awesome beauty of Tibet's majestic peaks and vast plateaus. Here, preserved in the monastic lineages and in the customs and institutions of the people, was to be found a spiritual treasury of almost incomparable beauty and richness. We need think no further than the ideal of the Bodhisattva and its resplendent iconography, of Chenrezig, Tara and Manjusri, of Milarepa, of the long line of Dalai Lamas who embody the ideal of Wisdom-Compassion which lies at the very heart of the tradition.



Following his several visits to Tibet Pallis devoted the rest of his life to the explication of Tibetan religious and cultural forms which were still so little understood in the West. At a time when all too many of the Western cognoscenti hailed Buddhism as a kind of rational and humanistic psychology, Pallis' writings served as an implacable reminder of the Transcendent which is the fountainhead of all integral religious traditions and without which all the doings of mortals are as nothing. He also exposed counterfeit forms of 'Tibetan esotericism', such as the bizarre concoctions conjured up by 'Lobsang Rampa' (one Cyril Hoskin, an English surgical goods maker and part-time photographer who never stepped outside his own country). In explaining the doctrines of the Vajrayana, some of them arcane, Pallis was aided by the peerless metaphysical works of the great perennialists – René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. These enabled him to discern the universal significance of beliefs and practices which, at first glance, seemed strange and alien to untutored Western eyes. It should also be noted that Pallis in turn made an invaluable contribution to the perennialist 'school' at large. As one of the few perennialist writers on Buddhism he brought a less combative and militant approach in his affirmation of the *sophia*

perennis and a more amiable tone than that of some other traditionalists, an observation which should not be construed as suggesting that he was intellectually any less rigorous.

Another very considerable asset was Pallis' deep immersion in the doctrines and forms of other traditions, one which came about though his own family background, his familiarity with Christianity, his tireless studies and through his association with representatives of the Western traditions as well the foremost perennialists of the age, most notably Guénon and Schuon. As readers of *The Buddhist Spectrum* will know, Pallis was able to write with rare authority and penetrating insight not only on Tibetan doctrines, forms, and practices but also those of other traditions, especially the Abrahamic. In that volume Pallis explores two subjects – the 'problem of evil' and the universality of grace – 'which Christian minds notoriously have found troublesome, by applying to [them] a characteristically Buddhist dialectical technique'.[17] I well remember the excitement I felt when first coming across these essays which seemed to me to be illuminated by the most dazzling insights. They still strike me that way. Similarly, in one of the earliest anthologies of traditionalist writings, *The Sword of Gnosis* (1974), we find Pallis writing about 'The Catholic Church in Crisis' and 'The Veil of the Temple'. The principle which informed all of Pallis' writings on inter-religious subjects, one shared by all perennialists, was clearly stated in his magisterial essay, 'Dharma the Dharmas':

> Dharma and the dharmas, unitive suchness and the suchness of diversified existence: here is to be found the basis of an interreligious exegesis which does not seek a remedy for historical conflicts by explaining away formal or doctrinal factors such as in reality translate differences of spiritual genius. Far from minimizing the importance of these differences in the name of a facile and eventually spurious ecumenical friendliness, they will be cherished for the positive message they severally carry and as necessities that have arisen out of the differentiation of mankind itself.[18]

Since the death of Frithjof Schuon the most eminent perennialist scholar, philosopher and metaphysician in the contemporary world has undoubtedly been Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Here he is surveying Pallis' work as a whole:

> Pallis was at once an incomparable authority on Buddhism, especially in its Tibetan form, a defender and protector of the Tibetan tradition in the West since the tragedies of 1951, a lover of nature and a mountain climber… a profound student of other religions, especially Christianity, and a very accomplished musician who did a great deal to revive the rich musical tradition of Renaissance England, which still possesses a great deal of spiritual substance despite the modernizing tendencies of the age.[19]

Pallis was not a prodigious writer. His essential *oeuvre* comprises only three books. *Peaks and Lamas* (1939) recounting Pallis' early sojourns in Western Tibet and the Himalayan kingdoms, is a captivating work and one of the most distinguished works of the genre, blending travelogue, discursive essays on aspects of Tibetan civilisation and metaphysical expositions. *A Buddhist Spectrum* gathers together several essays from his later years, irradiated by a gentle but clear-eyed wisdom that was the fruit of his long years of research, spiritual practice and first-hand experience. In reviewing *A Buddhist Spectrum* Huston Smith remarked, 'For insight, and the beauty insight requires if it is to be effective, I find no writer on Buddhism surpassing him'.[20] This was high praise indeed from the doyen of contemporary comparative religionists, but amply justified. These are indeed works to cherish. But, my own favourite amongst his works is *The Way and the Mountain*, focusing on the Tibetan tradition but situating it in the wider context of the perennial wisdom and the spiritual life which it entails. Pallis had no interest in research for its own sake, nor in any purely theoretical understanding of doctrine: his work was always attuned to the demands of the spiritual life itself.

There have been other Westerners whose writings are, to varying degrees, marked by acute metaphysical discernment, wide-ranging erudition, imaginative sympathy and a heartfelt love for Tibet and its people, although none have so pre-eminently combined these qualities as Pallis. One might mention not only Frithjof Schuon, whose few essays on Tibetan subjects are worth more than many shelves of orientalist studies, but figures such as Giuseppe Tucci, Anagarika Govinda, Hugh Richardson, David Snellgrove and Arnaud Desjardins. Nor should we forget the path-breaking labours of pioneers such as WY Evans-Wentz and the redoubtable Alexandra David-Néel, or

indeed of the first Tibetologists, those intrepid Jesuit scholars of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Then, too, there are the burgeoning works and teachings of the Tibetan diaspora, not least from the Dalai Lama himself, which keep alive at least some aspects of the tradition. But Marco Pallis, visiting Tibet at a fateful moment in its history and gifted with a rare metaphysical intelligence, had a singular role to play, testifying to the deepest significance of Tibet and its fate for the dark times in which we live. His works poignantly recall the beautiful and priceless treasures which have been so shamelessly destroyed. However, his writings on the Tibetan tradition comprise far more than an elegy, beautiful as it is; they are also an affirmation of that inviolable Spirit which cannot be destroyed.

Principal Sources

Marco Pallis' major works are, *Peaks and Lamas* (London: Cassell, 1939); *The Way and the Mountain: Tibet, Buddhism, and Tradition* (Revised and expanded edition of *The Way and the Mountain*, first published 1960), with 'Foreword' by Harry Oldmeadow, 'Introduction' by Joseph Fitzgerald and 'An Appreciation' by Paul Goble (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008); *A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (a revised and expanded edition of *A Buddhist Spectrum,* first published 1980), with 'Foreword' by Wayne Teasdale and 'Introduction' by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003); and an important essay, 'A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A.K. Coomaraswamy and R. Guénon' in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004). The best short accounts of Pallis are to be found in Joseph Fitzgerald's 'From Marco Pallis to Thubten Tenzin: A Son of Tibet Returns,' *Sacred Web* 22, Jan 2009, while Fitzgerald's 'Introduction' to the 2008 edition of *The Way and the Mountain* is the best concise overview of Pallis' life and work. The only detailed scholarly study of Pallis comprises a part of Paul Weeks' *Tradition and Modernity in the Transformation of Tibetan Buddhism* (PhD thesis, La Trobe University Bendigo, 2015). Weeks provides a detailed overview of Pallis' life and work before foregrounding previously neglected aspects of his exposition of the Tibetan religious tradition. He also situates him in the context of a modern (and, alas, 'postmodern') scholarly Tibetology which is often bereft of Pallis' many insights.

All sources cited are by Marco Pallis unless otherwise indicated.

1 *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 1980 edition, 91.

2 *Peaks and Lamas*, 1949 edition, 5.
3 See Joseph Fitzgerald, 'From Marco Pallis to Thubten Tendzin: A Son of Tibet Returns', *Sacred Web* 22, 2009, 41, n5.
4 'A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A.K. Coomaraswamy and R. Guénon' in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy, 2004, 7.
5 'Thomas Merton, 1915-1968', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 3:3, 1969;138-146.
6 William Stoddart, 'Marco Pallis (1895-1989)' in *Early British Friends: Notes and Memories* (unpublished manuscript), 10; cited in Paul Weeks, *Tradition and Modernity in the Transformation of Tibetan Buddhism*, PhD thesis, La Trobe University Bendigo, 2015.
7 'A Fateful Meeting of Minds', 8.
8 Poul Pederson, 'Traditionalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Life of a Modern Ladakhi: Abdul Wahid Radhu and Marco Pallis,' in *Mountains Monasteries and Mosques: Recent Research on Ladakh and the Western Himalaya*. Proceedings of the 13th Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies, ed. John Bray and Elena De Rossi (Roma: Fabrizio Serra editore, 2009), 243 (cited in Weeks).
9 *The Way and the Mountain*, 1.
10 *Peaks and Lamas*, 84.
11 Ibid, 121.
12 Arnaud Desjardins, *The Message of the Tibetans,* 1969, 20.
13 *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 1980 edition, 91.
14 Review of *The New Religions* by Jacob Needleman in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 5:3, 1971, 189-190.
15 Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 1966, xi.
16 Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1966, 42.
17 *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 2003 edition, xii.
18 Ibid, 134.
19 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Introduction' to *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 2003, xv-xvi.
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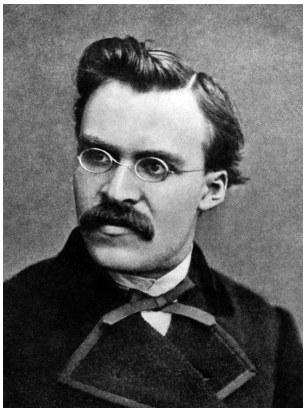
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

1844-1900

Philosophical Incendiary



To have paced out the whole circumference of modern consciousness, to have explored every one of its recesses, this is my ambition, my torture and my bliss.[1]

John Stuart Mill said of Coleridge that 'An enlightened radical or liberal ought to rejoice over such a conservative… even if a conservative philosophy were an absurdity, it is well calculated to drive out a hundred absurdities worse than itself.'[2] Let's turn this around to 'an enlightened conservative ought to rejoice over such a radical' as an angle of approach to Friedrich Nietzsche and his withering critique of religious belief. But first, a biographical sketch.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in the Prussian province of Saxony, the son of a strict Lutheran pastor and a mother whose family also had a strong clerical background. Nietzsche's grandfather had penned a treatise with the prodigal title of *Gamaliel, or the Everlasting Survival of Christianity, for Instruction and Reassurance in View of the Present-day Ferment in the Theological World*. His grandson was to bring to the 'theological world' something far more explosive than 'ferment'. Friedrich's father died when the boy was five, and in the following year his younger brother died at age two. Friedrich showed precocious signs of intellectual brilliance and was writing poetry and

reviews, and composing music, in his early teens. He received a thorough classical education and was well grounded in German, French, Latin and Greek. He became a self-styled atheist in his adolescence. His early academic career as a classical philologist was dazzling, already a full professor at the University of Basel at the age of twenty-four. The brilliant young scholar served as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, catching dysentery at the front. His health throughout his life was precarious – migraines, stomach disorders, poor eyesight, 'nerves', psychic disturbances. Although the evidence is inconclusive, he may have contracted syphilis as a young man, one possible factor in his physical and mental disintegration later in life. Over the years he spent a good deal of time in alpine health spas in Switzerland, foreshadowing Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain* (Thomas Mann himself was deeply influenced by Nietzsche, as were so many 20thC writers and thinkers).

In 1872 Nietzsche produced a highly controversial work on the ancient Greeks, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the first of a series of provocative works for which he was execrated from all sides. His academic career lasted only ten years before ill health forced him to resign from a university post in which he was neither comfortable nor welcome. For the rest of his life he survived on a miserable university pension (which eventually terminated) and a small inheritance. His creative intellectual life only lasted about sixteen years (1872-1888) after which he suffered a drastic breakdown, what one biographer called a 'collapse into the Beyond', descending into an impenetrable world of darkness, physical decay, senility, and possibly madness, variously attributed to syphilis, brain cancer and his self-destructive impulses, evident in such maxims as 'I know of no better purpose in life than to be destroyed by that which is great and impossible.'[3] Over the last decade of his life he was nursed by his mother and then, with 'tyrannical benevolence', by his sister Elisabeth, now returned from Nueva Germania, an ill-fated communal experiment in Paraguay intended to demonstrate to the New World the superiority of German culture.[4] She established the Nietzsche Archive in 1894 and became the custodian of Friedrich's work after his death, editing a posthumous and widely-read compilation of his late writings in *The Will to Power*. She became a vehement Nazi and was later accused of doctoring much of Nietzsche's work to mirror her own venomous anti-Semitism, nationalism and Fuhrer-worship, thus besmirching the reputation of a man who detested racism of any

kind, who became a stateless cosmopolitan who preferred to be 'a good European' rather than 'a good German', and whose thought and sensibility could hardly have been further removed from that of the Nazi demagogue. It was a sign of Elisabeth's standing in Nazi circles that Hitler himself attended her funeral in 1935. In recent years some scholars have argued that the egregious distortions in the German publications of Nietzsche's work in the Nazi era can be sheeted home not to Elisabeth but to Nazi Party ideologues and censors. Friedrich himself, perhaps appropriately, died in 1900.

Nietzsche lived a lonely, difficult life punctuated with moments of intense pleasure and happiness, a man intent on the fullest possible freedom with no ties to nation, family or profession. He had several close and intense but not very durable friendships, never married or had children, and suffered from acrimonious condemnations of his work. Two of his deepest relationships were with the composer Richard Wagner and the beautiful, brilliant and bewitching Russian psychoanalyst and poet, Lou Salomé, who later wrote one of the very earliest books about Nietzsche, published in 1894, six years before his death. On Wagner's death Nietzsche remarked, 'Wagner was by far the fullest man I have ever known. It was hard to be for six years the enemy of the man one most reveres...'.[5] The end of their friendship was provoked by Wagner's hypocritical 'playacting' in a chapel, espied by Nietzsche:

> As early as summer 1876, in the middle of the first [Bayreuth] festival, I took my leave of Wagner. I cannot bear ambivalence; ever since his return to Germany he has lowered himself step by step to everything I despise – even anti-Semitism... It was really high time that I took my leave: this was instantly proven to me. Richard Wagner, outwardly the conquering hero, in reality a rotting, despairing decadent, suddenly dropped, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross... [6]

Nietzsche's books (with dates of their German publication): *The Birth of Tragedy* (1972); *Thoughts out of Season* (aka *Untimely Meditations*) (1873-78); *Human, All-too-Human* (1878); *The Gay Science* (1882), in which his scandalous pronouncement that 'God is dead' first appears; *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-84); *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); *The Anti-Christ* (1888); *The Twilight of the Idols* (1989); and *The Will to Power* (compiled by Elizabeth and published

posthumously, 1901). We also have a series of *Notebooks* and a few other bits and pieces. His formative intellectual influences were the romantic thinkers Holderin and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche taking three key themes from the latter: the limitations of rationality, the power of the will to forge man's destiny, and the universal value of art, especially music. Art, Nietzsche declared, is 'the single superior counterforce against all will to negation of life'.[7] In his early years Nietzsche was influenced by Wagner's music and by Dostoevsky's novels which he admired greatly, identifying himself with some of their troubled protagonists. The fullest expression of his philosophy is to be found in *Beyond Good and Evil* while *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is his most poetic work and, for many readers, his most potent and durable.

Aspects of Nietzsche's work are something of an embarrassment. Take his notorious, apparently misogynistic views on women: 'Man should be trained for war, and woman for the warrior's relaxation; everything else is folly' and 'Men going amongst women should not forget the whip'.[8] These adolescent eruptions on the written page must be counterbalanced by what we know of the philosopher's real-life behaviour with women and by the testimony of several friends and acquaintances. An example: 'So unrestrained as a thinker, Nietzsche as a person was of exquisite sensitivity, tenderness and refined courtesy in attitude and manners towards the female sex, as others who knew him personally have often emphasized. Nothing in his nature could have made a disturbing impression on me.'[9] Recall too that he argued, strenuously and sincerely, for the independence and education of women. He also sought out and befriended intelligent and feisty women.

More troubling are Nietzsche's links – some putative and some real enough – with the diabolical ideology of Nazism, though here the picture is rather more muddy than is sometimes supposed. Reference has already been made to the 'Nazification' of some of his views while the actual relation of some of his ideas to Nazism is full of ambiguities. Nevertheless, we can say unequivocally that three of the ideological motive-forces of National Socialism were deeply repellent to the philosopher: the glorification of the State, xenophobic nationalism and anti-Semitism. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see how some Nietzschean formulations could easily be harnessed to Nazi ends: 'What is great? All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from

weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power increases – that a resistance is overcome'[10] or 'The collective misery of all these small beings [the masses] adds up to nothing except in the feelings of powerful men.'[11] or the claim, in *Thoughts Out of Season*, that the distance between the superior individual and the masses is greater than the distance between the ordinary masses and the animals – a vile idea which inadvertently foreshadows the gas chambers. Can we entirely exculpate Nietzsche from the possible consequences of his many semi-demented and toxic utterances? One commentator has pondered the question in these terms:

> However selective the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche may have been, it replicated elements of his thought. He did write that equality is the 'greatest of all lies,' and divided humanity into a hierarchy of the weak and the strong. Hans Stark, the head of the admissions detail at Auschwitz, had a sign over his desk reading *Mitleid ist Schwäche* ('Compassion Is Weakness'). This could be read as a crude condensation of Nietzsche's diatribe against compassion in *The Antichrist*.[12]

Still, Nietzsche was not Alfred Rosenberg, nor, for that matter, Adolf Eichmann. In this context, we might recall the cautionary remarks of Albert Camus, one of the most discerning commentators on Nietzsche: 'If Nietzsche and Hegel serve as alibis to the masters of Dachau… that does not condemn their entire philosophy. But it does lead to the suspicion that one aspect of their thought, or of their logic, can lead to these appalling conclusions'.[13]

Nietzsche was not one of the great philosophical system builders (Plato, Aquinas, Hegel, Marx and the like) but rather a ferocious, frighteningly incisive critic of both traditional religious and idealist philosophies *and* of the new shibboleths which had replaced the old ones: Science, Reason, Progress. A thinker who works through speculations, hunches, intuitions, dazzling fragments, flashes of insight, detonations; the philosopher, he said, 'is a man who constantly experiences, sees, hears, suspects, hopes, dreams extraordinary things; who is struck by his own thoughts as if from without, as if from above and below, (as if) by thunderclaps'.[14] Nietzsche's work is rich in paradoxes, conundrums, contradictions, but there *are* persistent and coherent themes which we can now isolate and briefly exposit, adding the caveat that some of his

preoccupations are here left out of the frame – his views, for instance, on time and eternal recurrence, or the half-baked Darwinism, or his corrosive insistence on the relativity of philosophy, religion, science, of thought itself (his principal legacy to the Parisian postmodernist oracles). Of necessity we shall have drastically to adumbrate Nietzsche's governing ideas, to reduce them to their simplest formulations, thus sometimes doing violence to their complexity, their ironic ambiguities, their more fugitive meanings and elusive resonances.

Nietzsche's Cardinal Themes

The Apollonian and the Dionysian

In his study of the ancient Greek ethos, expressed pre-eminently in tragedy, Nietzsche discerned two streams of thought, two sensibilities, which he characterized as the Apollonian and Dionysian, the former positing a higher, transcendent, perfect order of reality to which humans could aspire, while the latter is earthbound and attuned to the irrational, the emotional, the psychic elements in man's makeup, finding expression in intoxication, ecstasy, in the orgiastic experience where the boundaries between 'man' and 'nature' were dissolved. Tragedy is born out of the conjunction of these two impulses in the human spirit. Early Greek thought was marked by a creative fusion of these two but the emergent ascendancy of a new rationalistic, analytical and sceptical outlook, exemplified by Euripides, Socrates and Plato, meant the eclipse of the Dionysian outlook; later the Apollonian tradition of Greek thought, particularly in its Platonic guise, was synthesized with Christianity to produce a calculating, rationalistic, body-denying, anti-Dionysian philosophy, altogether disastrous for the human spirit.

The 'Death of God'

From one point of view Nietzsche's famous proclamation, 'God is dead', is a brutally direct recognition of the most fundamental changes percolating for centuries through the European *zeitgeist* by way of Renaissance humanism, the Scientific Revolution, the philosophical rationalism of Descartes and later the Enlightenment philosophers, and in the materialist philosophies of Ludwig Feuerbach ('Man is what he eats') and Karl Marx ('Religion is the opium of the masses'). As scientists like Copernicus, Galileo and

Newton changed our understanding of the material universe, philosophers like Descartes, Hume, Locke, Kant and Voltaire were eroding the intellectual foundations of religious belief and faith. The very idea of 'the death of God' was not new. Many Enlightenment thinkers had dismissed 'God' as a hypothesis which could now be catapulted into the rubbish bin of history. In 1852 Heinrich Heine wrote: 'Our heart is full of terrible pity. It is the old Jehovah himself preparing for death... Can you hear the ringing of the bell? Kneel down, they are bringing the sacraments to a dying God.'[15] Nietzsche in the same vein: 'The greatest event of recent times – that "god is dead", that the belief in the Christian God is no longer tenable – is beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe.'[16] What is really distinctive in Nietzsche's philosophy is the sense of foreboding, the sense that a whole era of European civilisation is ending, the peculiar *admixture of celebration and dread* with which Nietzsche peered into a godless future. His contemporaries, he said, had no notion that from now onwards they would exist on 'a mere pittance of inherited values, soon to be overtaken by an enormous bankruptcy'; 'I foresee something terrible. Chaos everywhere. Nothing left which is of any value, nothing which commands: Thou shalt'.[17] It is the same chilling insight that Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov articulates in declaring that 'Without God, everything is permitted'. Like his two prescient contemporaries, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche anticipates that sense of meaninglessness, angst and despair which is the very hallmark of so much modern post-religious thought and art. Further, he knows that his name and the 'death of God' will be inextricably linked hereafter. And so he writes,

> I know my fate. One day there will be associated with my name the recollection of something frightful – of a crisis like no other on earth, of the profoundest collision of conscience, of a decision evoked against everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man, I am dynamite.[18]

The Critique of Religion

Nietzsche's implacable repudiation of religion (by which he usually meant Christianity) was fuelled by his conviction that religion is idealistic, moralistic, egalitarian and negative. It is based on an illusion, the notion of a transcendent deity: '*To overthrow idols* (my

word for 'ideals'), that rather is my business. Reality has been deprived of its value, its meaning, its veracity to the same degree as an ideal world has been *fabricated*...'.[19] Not only is a belief in God childish, it is by no means harmless for it impoverishes, diminishes and weakens man; by forcing him to recognize a higher authority than himself it turns man into a cowardly weakling. Nietzsche's view is in sympathy with Feuerbach's claim that 'God' is a vacuum sucking up man's energy. Man must have the courage and will to make himself 'divine'. The morality, integral to religion, is 'the herd instinct in the individual', 'the instinct to negate life'.[20] 'The bite of conscience, like the bite of a dog into a stone, is a stupidity.'[21] The belief in immortality and the *spiritual equality* of all before God is an intolerable sentimentality while the Christian affirmation of a counterfeit 'love' camouflages weakness, a refusal of 'life'. Here is Nietzsche in full flight on this theme:

> '*Love*' – The subtlest artifice which Christianity has over the other religions is a word: it spoke of *love*. Thus it became the *lyrical* religion… There is in the word love something so ambiguous and suggestive, something which speaks to the memory and future hope, that even the meanest intelligence and coldest heart still feels something of the lustre of this word. The shrewdest woman and the commonest man think when they hear it of the least selfish moments of their whole life, even if Eros has paid them only a passing visit; and those countless numbers who never experience love, of parents, or children, or lovers, especially however the men and women of sublimated sexuality, have made their find in Christianity.[22]

As to religious doctrines and institutions, they are 'power-structures' built on lies:

> The 'Law', the 'will of God', the 'sacred book', 'inspiration' – all merely words for the conditions under which the priest comes to power, by which he maintains his power – these concepts are to be found at the basis of all priestly organizations, all priestly or priestly-philosophical power structures. The 'holy lie' – common to Confucius, the Law-Book of Manu, Mohammad, the Christian Church: it is not

> lacking in Plato. 'The truth exists': this means, wherever it is heard, the priest is lying... [23]

Kapow! Take that!

It is worth noting in passing that for all his thundering about Christianity Nietzsche not only felt some reverence for the figure of Christ, 'the only one Christian', but in his later years signed his letters as 'the Crucified One', while at other times using 'Dionysius', perhaps the two self-appellations signifying a kind of schizophrenic tension. It is also not without interest that Nietzsche, perhaps under the influence of Schopenhauer, was fascinated by the Buddha and his teachings.[24]

The Critique of Science and Philosophy

No less savage was Nietzsche's hatchet-job on modern science and philosophy and their underpinnings in the idea of progress and a faith in the power of rationality. The idea of 'progress', the belief that history has a direction, a purpose, and an underlying meaning, he asserted, is a left-over from Christian teleology, a sort of residual anachronism, while the notion of an objective rationality which gives access to 'truth' is also an illusion. 'Philosophers all pose as if their real opinions had been discovered through the self-evolving of a cold, pure divinely indifferent dialectic...'.[25] In reality no thinking can be divorced from the subjective thinker, from his/her particular vantage-point: all philosophy is a form of 'memoir', a thinly camouflaged 'confession'.

> Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (and immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ from which the whole plant had grown.[26]

'There are no philosophies, only philosophers.'[27] 'Truth' is 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations, poetically and rhetorically intensified... Truths are illusions that are no longer thought of as such, metaphors that have lost their images, and must be regarded as metal rather than coins.'[28] Science is neither objective nor neutral; every kind of 'logic' is a human construct which we impose on phenomena and is not dictated by the nature of things themselves: the universe is a

meaningless and irrational phenomenon on which we *impose* structure and meaning.

The Will to Power and the Ubermensch

Man is a material being. Nietzsche wants us to embrace the body as the only reality, to abolish the illusory 'spirit': 'body am I entirely and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about body'.[29] But man *does* have will, in particular, the *will to power*: the strong can transcend themselves through the affirmation of their own will, can become *Ubermensch*, 'higher beings', super-men. 'What is the ape to men? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the Superman.'[30] To simplify Nietzsche's agenda to the edge of caricature*:* God is dead but man can be God if he dares. A few great individuals will accept this challenge: they are the justification for human existence; the 'herd' counts for nothing. In fairness we should note that the Nietzschean will to power, itself so potent an idea, is not about dominance over others but primarily about *self*-overcoming, *self*-transformation.[31]

*

A Few Aphorisms and Apothegms from Dr Nietzsche

> • Is man God's mistake? Or is God man's mistake? (*Twilight of the Idols*).
>
> • Man is a rope, fastened between beast and Superman – a rope over an abyss… (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*).
>
> • He who considers more deeply knows that, whatever his judgements and acts may be, he is always wrong (*Human, All Too Human*).
>
> • When I picture a perfect reader, I always picture a monster of courage and curiosity, also something supple, cunning, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer... (*Ecce Homo*).
>
> • What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God? (*The Gay Science*).
>
> • Philosophy as I have understood and lived it, is voluntary living in ice and high mountains – a seeking after everything strange and questionable in existence, all that

has hitherto been excommunicated by morality (*Ecce Homo*).

• Religions are affairs of the rabble. I have need of washing my hands after contact with religious people (*Ecce Homo*).

• Without music, life would be a mistake. Germans even imagine God singing songs (*Twilight of the Idols*).

• There are no facts, only interpretations (*Notebooks*)

• When you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you (*Beyond Good and Evil*).

• The preacher of chastity is the real sinner (*The Anti-Christ*).

• To take such a select crop of youth and energy and power and then to put it in front of cannons – that is *madness* (*Notebooks*).

• Art is the supreme task, the truly metaphysical activity in this life (*The Birth of Tragedy).*

• Man does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that (*Twilight of the Idols).*

*

Nietzsche as 'Prophet'

One of Nietzsche's more sympathetic critics made a nice point when he said that Nietzsche 'anticipates the future: not, however, as a true prophet, but as one of its accomplices.'[32] It is not hard to discern these *anticipations*: his portents of a post-religious world in which there is no 'centre'; his affirmation, before Freud, of the irrational and the claims of the subconscious, his reclamation of the Dionysian; the critique of the limits of 'rationality' which is a human construct which always operates in a particular cultural and intellectual context; his stress on the relativity of all morality, all knowledge, all methodology, all epistemology; the subversion, before the 'new physics', of Newtonian science; the trailblazing 'existentialism' which Karl Jaspers usefully defined as a 'a philosophy which does not cognize objects' but 'elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker',[33] philosophy as an intensely personal engagement with 'life' and the

confrontation with certain urgent problematics rather than a matter of sterile speculations and abstruse abstractions; the repudiation, before the horrors of the next century, of Victorian complacencies about 'progress'.

Nietzsche confronted certain key questions which have haunted us ever since. Particularly: is it possible to live without 'God', and if, so, how? He was attuned to the spirit of his times in a way which is almost unparalleled (Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard might be comparable figures from his era). He has exerted a massive and sometimes covert influence on a wide range of 20thC thinkers, particularly the existentialists (of whom Martin Heidegger is the most important) and on the legion of 'deconstructionists' and 'postmodernists', including many of the Parisian celebrities. One of his biographers gives us an imposing list of creative writers/artists in whose work we can detect a Nietzschean imprint. Here are just some of them: Richard Strauss, Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Heinrich Mann, CG Jung, Herman Hesse, Rilke, Alfred Schweitzer, André Gide, WB Yeats, Gabriele D'Annunzio, James Joyce, TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Paul Valéry. To these we might add a more or less endlessly proliferating list of philosophers and theorists of various kind – Martin Heidegger, EM Cioran, Martin Buber, Joseph Campbell, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, to name but a few.

Nietzsche Pro and Contra

Thus far an overview of Nietzsche's life and a brief exposition of some of his central ideas. Now for a few more personal observations, made by a reader (myself) who actually rejects most of Nietzsche's assumptions and claims, finds some of his philosophy abhorrent but who nevertheless finds him a captivating and sometimes beautifully poetic writer (somewhere he insists that he had 'remained a poet to the end whichever way the term is defined') and a bracing and salutary thinker. Nietzsche: a lacerating critic of the pomposities and hypocrisies of his time; a ranting firebrand who, almost in secret, nursed a tender heart, a man who broke down at the unbearable sight of a man beating a horse, someone who in his dealings with others was remembered for 'his quietness, his passivity, his soft voice, his poor but neatly kept dress, the scrupulous good manners which he showed towards all, particularly women';[34] in some senses, paradoxically, a man with a spiritual sensibility marked by what

Ananda Coomaraswamy called 'characteristic mystic intuitions'[35]; an individual with a certain undeniable nobility of soul (a word anathema to Friedrich). There is something deeply appealing and undeniably 'spiritual' about this strange figure who – with his ferocious inwardness, his almost monastic devotion to the life of the mind, his heroic struggle against ill health, his rejection of everything petty and mediocre – seems to belong, simultaneously in a desert monastery and in a dark Dostoevskian dreamworld.

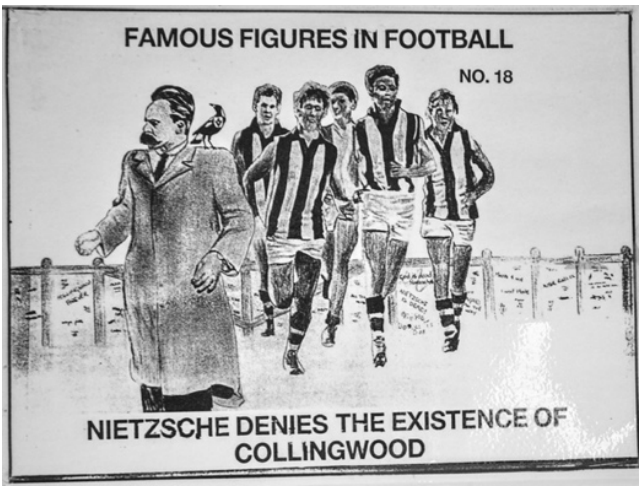
Nietzsche is indeed a particularly strange case: whilst celebrating the 'death of God' he simultaneously understood some of its most appalling consequences. Consider, for instance, this famous passage from *The Gay Science*:

> Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place and cried incessantly: 'I am looking for God! I am looking for God!'. As many of those did not believe in God were standing there he excited considerable laughter… The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. 'Where has God gone?' he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up and down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is more and more night not coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God?'[36]

As one representative of the Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, put it: 'The loss of God is death, is desolation, hunger, separation. All the tragedy of man is in one word, "godlessness".'[37] At some deep level Nietzsche understood this all too well – but he couldn't help himself, seduced by his own delirious dream of the Dionysian *Ubermensch*.

One of the most insightful summations of Nietzsche's personality and thought comes from Lou Salomé. Her observations, replete with a sharp sense of the contradictions and conundrums posed by this 'infuriating, invigorating' thinker,[38] furnish us with an appropriate conclusion.

> All of Nietzsche's knowledge arose from a powerful religious mood and was insolubly knotted: self-sacrifice and apotheosis, the cruelty of one's own destruction and the lust for self-deification, sorrowful ailing and triumphal recovery, incandescent intoxication and cool consciousness. One senses here the close entwining of mutual contradictions; one senses the overflowing and voluntary plunge of over-stimulated and tensed energies into chaos, darkness and terror, and then an ascending urge toward the light and most tender moments – the urges of a will 'that frees him from the distress of fullness and overfullness and from the affliction of the contradictions compressed within him' – a chaos that wants to give birth to a god, and must give birth to one.[39]



Principal Sources

The most useful anthologies of excerpts from Nietzsche's writings are *A Nietzsche Reader* (Penguin, 1977), ed R.J. Hollingdale, and *The Vision of Nietzsche,* ed. Philip Novak (Rockport: Element, 1996). The best full-dress biography is Sue Prideaux's exhilarating *I am Dynamite: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Faber, 2018) while Lesley Chamberlain's *Nietzsche in Turin* (London: Quartet, 1997) gives us a charming, touching and deeply sympathetic portrait of Nietzsche's last years before the onset of his final afflictions. Erich Heller's essay in *The Disinherited Mind* is one of the more interesting in a veritable blizzard of essays and articles while J.P. Stern's *Nietzsche* (London: Collins, 1978) is a lucid and level-headed introduction to Nietzsche's thought.

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1 *The Will to Power*. In this essay I have only indicated the book or essay from which the passage is taken, without referring to particular editions. Many of these passages are well-known and can easily be found in the anthologies mentioned in 'Principal Sources' above, and/or online.

2 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, London: Hogarth Press, 1990, 227.

3 *Thoughts Out of Season*.

4 The felicitous phrase 'tyrannical benevolence' is Lesley Chamberlain's, in *Nietzsche in Turin*, Quartet, 1997, 186.

5 J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche*, Collins, 1978, 35.

6 Ivor Frenzel, *Friedrich Nietzsche: An Illustrated Biography*, Pegasus, 1967, 70.

7 *The Will to Power*.

8 *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

9 Resa von Schirndorf, cited in Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, 28.

10 *The Anti-Christ*.

11 *Notebooks*.

12 Alex Ross in the *New Yorker*: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/14/nietzsches-eternal-return

13 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*; citacoes.in/autores/albert-camus/?page=12

14 Cited in Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, 34.

15 Heine quoted in J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche*, 93.

16 J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche*, 93.

17 In Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, Penguin, 1961, 5.

18 *Ecce Homo*.

19 Ibid.

20 *The Gay Science*.

21 *The Wanderer and His Shadow*.

22 *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*.

23 *The Anti-Christ*.

[24] For a discussion of Nietzsche's interest in Buddhism and his own role as a quasi-religious prophet, see Philip Novak, *The Vision of Nietzsche*, Element, 1996, 181-191.

[25] *Beyond Good and Evil*.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Epigraph in Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, 1; original source not given.

[28] Quoted in Ivor Frenzel, *Friedrich Nietzsche,* 58.

[29] Quoted in T. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred,* Westminster Press, 1963, 179

[30] *Thus Spake Zaruthustra*.

[31] Among the 'higher men' with whom Zaruthustra converses we find Schopenhauer, Wagner, Darwin, and Nietzsche himself.

[32] J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche*, 84.

[33] In John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin, 1968, 471.

[34] Sue Prideaux, *'I am Dynamite': A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Faber, 2019, 191. See also Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, 28.

[35] Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche' in *The Dance of Shiva*, Noonday Press, 1957, 141.

[36] from *The Gay Science* (1882) in *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1977, 202-203.

[37] Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourzah, *God and Man*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1974, p. 68.

[38] Alex Ross, *New Yorker* article.

[39] From Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche, the Man in His Works* (1894), quoted in D.A. Barry, 'Rapture, Religion and Madness Part One: Lou Andreas-Lou Andreas-Salomé on Nietzsche', *3 AM Magazine* (online). Another insightful but problematic assessment of Nietzsche comes from Frithjof Schuon in his challenging essay about 'culturism' and the 'cult of genius', 'To Have a Center', in which we find the following description of Nietzsche's output: 'Here, too, there is a passionate exteriorization of an inward fire, but in a manner that is both deviated and demented; we have in mind here, not the Nietzschean philosophy… but his poetical work, whose most intense expression is in part his *Zarathustra*. What this highly uneven book manifests above all is the violent reaction of an *a priori* profound soul against a mediocre and paralyzing cultural environment; Nietzsche's fault was to have only a sense of grandeur in the absence of all intellectual [i.e., metaphysical] discernment. *Zarathustra* is basically the cry of a grandeur trodden underfoot, whence comes the heart-rending authenticity – grandeur precisely – of certain passages; not all of them, to be sure, and above all not those which express a half-Machiavellian, half-Darwinian philosophy, or minor literary cleverness. Be that as it may, Nietzsche's misfortune, like that of other men of genius, such as Napoleon, was to be born after the Renaissance and not before it; which indicates evidently an aspect of their nature, for there is no such thing as chance.' *To Have a Center,* World Wisdom, 1990, 8.

GEORGE STEINER

1929-2020

an examined life

Central to everything I am and believe and have written is my astonishment, naive as it seems to people, that you can use human speech both to bless, to love, to build, to forgive and also to torture, to hate, to destroy and to annihilate.[1]

Much has been written by and about George Steiner, once described as 'a polymathic European intellectual of particular severity' while another commentator called him 'a humanities faculty in himself, an academy of one'.[2] His work is staggering in its range and erudition, scintillating in its insights, sometimes deeply disturbing, often controversial. I was first introduced to his writings during my undergraduate days; *Language and Silence* knocked me sideways. Since then I have, as best I could, followed his work but confess that some of his theorizing about the nature of linguistics, 'grammatology' and hermeneutics is altogether too abstruse for me. Rather than essaying some kind of bird's-eye view of Steiner's impressive *oeuvre* here I offer no more than some remarks about his 'autobiography', if it can be called that, *Errata: an examined life* (1998).[3] Before that we might take our bearings by recalling the general contours of his life.

Steiner was born in Paris to Viennese Jewish parents of secular outlook, the family having left Austria five years earlier because of the

swelling tide of anti-Semitism. The boy grew up with three 'mother tongues': German, French and English. His mother often started a sentence in one language and finished it in another. Steiner later said he felt at home in three and a half languages, the 'half' being 'American English'. The family spent World War II in New York, Steiner afterwards being educated at the University of Chicago, Harvard and Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He worked for several years as a journalist, marred a Lithuanian scholar who became a distinguished political historian, completed a doctorate, taught at Princeton, and dropped anchor at Cambridge where, like FR Leavis (the subject of one of Steiner's glittering essays), he was ill-treated by people with smaller minds – a phenomenon almost universal in academia. The story goes that his appointment to a full lectureship at Cambridge was blocked after his affirmative response to a question from Muriel Bradbrook, during his interview, as to whether he had written the following sentence 'To shoot a man because you disagree with him about Hegel's dialectic is after all to honour the human spirit.'[4]

In 1990 he delivered 'Grammars of Creation' as the Gifford Lectures. In the last two decades of his life he held positions at the universities of Geneva, Harvard and Oxford, and was awarded various honours in several different countries. His first published book was *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959), his last *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan* (2011). Between the two a whole gallery of books as well as myriad articles and reviews many of which appeared in such places as the *TLS* and the *New Yorker*, and several ventures into fiction. To the *New Yorker* alone he contributed something in the order of 130 reviews, many of them substantial. As a pointer to his wide-ranging interests, particularly his immersion in what we might call the Western Tradition, consider the subjects of some of the essays collected in *No Passions Spent* (1996): Homer, the Hebrew Bible, Plato, St John's Gospel, Shakespeare, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (the 18thC painter), Charles Péguy, Simone Weil, Husserl, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Schoenberg. Not much light reading in that lot!

Turn now to *Errata*. No one familiar with Steiner's writing will have expected a bloated, narcissistic, self-indulgent autobiography of the kind now so much in vogue: and, indeed, the slender proportions and the substance of this work attest to a different purpose. What is on offer is a series of ruminations on Steiner's familiar themes, here and there lightened with autobiographical vignettes – sometimes

poignant, sometimes cryptic, always spare. The early chapters marvellously evoke Steiner's childhood milieux, and there is an affectionate portrait of his father. We are presented with a few deftly sketched incidents from Steiner's adolescence and undergraduate days and, later in the book, generous portraits of teachers and mentors such as Allen Tate and Gershom Scholem. Beyond that the reader will not find much by way of standard autobiographical fare: a few affectionate but fleeting references to his own family, the odd fragmentary reminiscence and confessional revelation, a few epiphanic moments. Although the autobiographical element is sparse there are moments of candour and intimacy which give this work a different texture from his other weighty and sometimes intimidating books.

Steiner's work is, of course, well-known if today somewhat unfashionable in more *chic* intellectual circles. *Language and Silence* was a collection of phosphoric essays concerned with the problematic 'centrality and prestige of the *Logos*' in European culture, and the possible collusions of European 'high culture' with the political barbarisms of the twentieth century. More particularly Steiner probed the possible relationship between the whole European cultural tradition and the moral enormities of the Holocaust, in the process traumatizing some raw nerves in the European psyche (how else to explain the hysterical antipathy which the book occasioned in some quarters?). In his provocative explorations of such problems as the relation between 'word and world', the mysteries of 'signification' and the 'language crisis' of the early twentieth century Steiner actually anticipated some of the concerns of the Parisian post-structuralists whom he regards with a kind of pained disdain, if one might so put it. *Language and Silence* was full of small but glittering gems. I best remember the essays on Homer, Kafka, FR Leavis, and the Frankfurt School of Marxist *Kulturkritik* (at that time still little known in the Anglo-American academy), as well as the confronting essays on the implication of literary and artistic humanism in the Shoah. *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971) discerned the immediate origins of totalitarian barbarism in the 'great ennui' of the 19thC but located the origins of anti-Semitism in the gentile response to the three 'transcendent impositions' of Judaism: Abrahamic monotheism, the impossible ethical idealism of the Nazarene, and the messianic call of utopian socialism.

As Steiner observes in *Errata* (pp154-5), the 'taxing themes' of *Language and Silence* might well have commanded a lifetime's work. He had earlier written two of his finest books, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959) and *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), and now went on to a series of dense works on a range of subjects, establishing himself as a prodigious polymath (a highly suspect condition in academia!): the 'mapping' of the complex relations between philosophy, linguistics and hermeneutics, and the problematics of translation and grammatology (*After Babel*, 1975; *On Difficulty* 1978); post-Nietzschean ontology, epistemology and metaphysics (*Heidegger*, 1978); the provenance of classical mythology (*Antigones*, 1984); interrogations of the literary canon, and of the interconnections of art, philosophy and theology (*Real Presences,* 1991; *No Passion Spent*, 1996). By now there is hardly a major European writer, painter, composer, or philosopher on whom Steiner has not cogitated at some point! There were also several forays into fiction; I, for one, am grateful Steiner did not make the novel his 'foremost business' (p154).

Errata synthesizes Steiner's multifarious themes and preoccupations in one short and accessible work. It reads as a series of essays, each heavily weighted with the characteristic and sometimes profligate density of allusion and reference, but with the central theme articulated with the pungency which marks so much of his work. His subjects: his commitment to the particularities of thought, creativity and experience, and the consequent distrust of Theory (often, in his view 'mendacious' in the domain of the Humanities, p5); the conditions of 'humane literacy', the hermeneutics of 'reading' and the nature of the 'classic'; the peculiar genii of Shakespeare, Racine and Dante; the proper function of the Academy (sure to aggravate both utilitarians and ideologues); the singular role of the Jews in the intellectual, psychological, creative and spiritual history of the West; the mysterious potencies of music, resistant to all but the most shadowy theorizations; multilingualism and *homo sapiens* as a 'language-animal'; politics and human creativity; the 'death of God' and the consequences which Nietzsche anticipated with such icy prescience. Steiner's vantage point is always our own 'season of bestiality'. He returns again and again, sometimes by way of antagonism, to some of the heavy lifters in the European tradition: Homer, Plato, Job, Dante, Shakespeare, Descartes, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, Freud, Kafka, Rilke, Joyce,

Eliot, Heidegger (as far as I can figure it the only woman on whom he has written in any detail is Simone Weil). These names signal the imaginative coordinates of a profoundly European sensibility; the non-Western constellations do not come within Steiner's orbit while he regarded American culture as, at best, a pale derivative. (He upset a lot of Americans with his essay on this subject, 'The Archives of Eden' where he wryly observes that it 'provoked the bitterest rebuke and dismissal' which may not have been altogether unjustified.[5])

There is much in *Errata* which will upset dogmatists of various stripe: this is no bad thing. Affronts to complacency, provocations, challenges – these are to be welcomed, though, it must be said, Steiner sometimes lapses into the strident pontifications of the frustrated preacher. Certainly his assumptions and values, his understanding of the cultural tradition, his commitment to the idea of the 'classic' and the canon, his views on pedagogy, his suspicion of Theory (psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postcolonial etc), his 'theological' preoccupations, the arraignment of Christianity, the rather feeble concessions to feminism, are all open to serious challenge. But Steiner is a critic who generates creative disagreement. Occasionally he stumbles into crankiness but his central arguments demand respect if not always assent.

Errata recounts an incident when Humphrey House, returning the young Steiner's prize-winning essay at Oxford, remarked of it, 'A touch dazzling, wouldn't you say?'. Steiner tells us that 'the epithet fell like mid-winter' (p129). It recalls another, earlier occasion when one of Steiner's teachers at the University of Chicago returned an essay on Milton with only the terse annotation, 'Flamboyant' (p124). Yes, quite! Steiner can be both ironically self-deprecatory and a touch self-congratulatory; we get the admixture in these anecdotes. 'Dazzling' and 'flamboyant' are indeed words which come readily to mind in considering Steiner's work; 'iridescent', 'brilliant', 'glittering' might be others. The limitations implicit in such adjectives – suggestive of surfaces and appearances rather than depths – signal some of the vulnerabilities in Steiner's work. And indeed Steiner's critics have reproached him for just these qualities. No gainsaying the fact that Steiner sometimes slips into the flashy and the glib, that he succumbs to the temptations of the captivating rhetorical flourish and the almost sophistic sleight-of-hand when a more sober, judicious and patient inquiry would be more adequate to the often intractable issues at hand. In footy parlance it might be said that

Steiner sometimes plays with one eye on the grandstand. On the other hand, when Steiner is altogether engaged he has few equals as a cultural and textual critic. Recall his marvellously exact description, in *Language and Silence*, of the kind of critical practice exemplified by Leavis at the height of his powers: '[The critic] realizes to the full the experience given in the words of the poet or the novelist. He aims at complete responsiveness, at a kind of poised vulnerability of consciousness in the encounter with the text. He proceeds with an attention which is close and stringent, yet also provisional, and at all times subject to revaluation.'[6] That phrase, *poised vulnerability of consciousness*, catches something of the spirit of Steiner's own work as a critic. (It is, of course, a formulation unlikely to find favour with the exponents of the latest critical fashions.)

At its worst Steiner's prose can be baroque and obscufatory; at its best it is exhilarating. Some of each in this volume. Unhappily, Steiner seems to have developed a whole new battery of words and phrases whose purposes are sometimes more theatrical than explicatory. I particularly noticed 'fantasticate', 'somnabular', 'prepotent', 'lapidary' and 'executive' as words which strutted across the page far too often. One might have expected more scruple and precision from one who professes an admiration for Orwell's well-known essay on language and politics.

Errata then, might more accurately if awkwardly be subtitled 'suggestive fragments of an intellectual autobiography', written by a déracinated and intellectually nomadic Jewish intellectual, ambivalent humanist and 'Platonic anarchist' (p121). For readers unfamiliar with Steiner's work it would serve well as an introduction. His writing is occasionally ostentatious, florid, opaque. But these are paltry vices next to the book's considerable distinctions. It is, in the main, deeply thoughtful, provocative, shimmering with mercurial insights, morally impassioned, generous, at moments surprisingly moving. I commend the book to anyone interested in the art, literature and philosophy of 'the Western tradition' (and in what this term might actually comprise). But anyone confronting the perplexities of the human condition and the pathologies of modernity will find something of value here. *Errata* can also be urged on those seeking some relief from the barren postmodernist shibboleths which etiolate so much of our contemporary intellectual life.

Principal Sources

My own encounter with Steiner's thought has come primarily through *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast* (London: Faber, 1959), *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber, 1967*), In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1971), *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber, 1989), *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber, 1996) and *Errata: an examined life* ((London: Phoenix, 1998).

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1 From the Gifford Lectures, 1990.

2 Eric Homburger, 'George Steiner Obituary', *The Guardian*, 6 Feb, 2020; and Adam Gopnik, 'The Seriousness of George Steiner', *The New Yorker*, 5 February, 2020.

3 The bulk of this essay first appeared as a book review in *The Animist*, 1999; http://theanimist.netgazer.net.au

4 Eric Homburger, 'George Steiner Obituary', *The Guardian*, 6 Feb, 2020.

5 Introduction *to No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, x.

6 'F.R.Leavis' in *Language and Silence* (Penguin edition), 230.

HANNAH ARENDT

1906-1975

totalitarianism and the 'banality of evil'

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.[1]

Hannah Arendt presents us with an exemplary case-study of the 20thC European intellectual, although that was a description she disliked – 'intellectual', she said, 'what a hateful word!' Her life, like so many others, was shaped by the defining events of war, revolution, depression, fascism, the Holocaust, exile, the Cold War. She was intimately familiar with many of the leading lights of mid-century intellectual life not only in Europe but also in America. Amongst her array of mentors, friends and lovers in Europe and the Middle East we find such figures as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Karl Mannheim, Gershom Scholem, Raymond Aron and Bertolt Brecht, while on the other side of the Atlantic mention may be made of Mary McCarthy, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, WH Auden, Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell as well as

fellow-exiles such as Herman Broch, Kurt Wolff and Salo Baron. She is best known for two works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), one a hefty contribution to political philosophy, the other highly controversial *reportage* blended with philosophic and moral ruminations of the most serious kind. However, her concerns and her formative intellectual influences – the Greek philosophers of Antiquity, St Augustine, Kant, Goethe, Marx, existential philosophy – were wide-ranging indeed. She spent the first half of her life in a Europe ravaged by war, revolution and depression, the second in the USA in the tumultuous years of the Cold War, McCarthyism, the civil rights movement, and the upheavals of the 1960s. We might well say that she lived in the very vortex of the 20th century. After a brief overview of her life we shall turn to a few of the motifs in her work.

Life and Writings

Hannah Arendt was born in Hanover in 1906, into a comfortable family of secular Jews, originally refugees from anti-Semitism in what is now Lithuania (then under Russian rule). The family was progressive-leftist in political outlook; her mother was a committed social democrat and a follower of Rosa Luxemburg whom Arendt also came to admire as a fiercely independent and fearless woman engaged in public life. Hannah exhibited precocious talents as a school-girl; by the age of fourteen she had read Kierkegaard, Kant and Jaspers – heavy going for anyone, let alone a fourteen-year old! As a schoolgirl she was already feisty and rebellious, and was expelled from her secondary school for leading a student boycott against a teacher who had insulted her; she was not one to take such things lying down. She studied at the universities of Marburg, Freiburg and Heidelberg under Heidegger, Husserl and Jaspers respectively, three of the heavyweights of existentialist philosophy. Alongside her philosophical studies Arendt continued to read widely, especially favouring the works of Schiller, Hölderlin, Herder and Goethe, and later made an intensive study of German Romanticism. She conducted an intense love-affair over several years with Heidegger, 'the hidden king who reigned in the realm of thinking', as she described him (the relationship was briefly resumed, in some fashion, late in life). She also developed a lifelong friendship with Jaspers under whose supervision she wrote her doctoral thesis, published in 1929 as *Love and Saint Augustine*. Another enduring

relationship dating from her university days was with Anne Mendelssohn who introduced her to the writings of Rahel Varnhagen, soon to become the subject of one of Arendt's earliest books. In 1929 Arendt married Gunther Stern (later known as Gunther Anders), a phenomenological philosopher and journalist.

Hitler's rise to power, the spectre of Nazi anti-Semitism, and her arrest and brief imprisonment by the Gestapo compelled Arendt to flee Germany in 1933. Brief sojourns in Prague and Geneva were followed by six years in France (1933–39) where she worked for several Jewish refugee organisations. In 1936 she separated from Stern and hooked up with the poet, philosopher and fellow-fugitive, Heinrich Blücher, whom she married in 1940, remaining with him until his death in 1970. In 1937 the Nazis stripped her of German citizenship. She remained a stateless person until she became an American citizen in 1951. She was interred as an 'alien' in France in the first year of the war but escaped her captors, fled south where she had a fleeting reunion with her friend, the ill-fated Walter Benjamin, soon to die by his own hand when his escape from France was thwarted. (Later in life she edited the influential compilation of Benjamin's essays published as *Illuminations*. Benjamin was a cousin of Arendt's first husband.) Arendt eventually made her way to America via Portugal. Her flight from France was aided by the American journalist Varian Fry, head of the Emergency Rescue Committee which he had established to save Jewish writers and artists from the clutches of the Nazis. Fry is credited with saving more than 2000 people, amongst them Marc Chagall, Max Ophüls, Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, Arthur Koestler and several members of the Mann family.[2]

In 1941 Arendt and her husband, and later her mother, settled in New York where she found a professional sanctuary in the New School for Social Research, a private graduate university where she retained a professorship until her death in 1975. She not only worked in an academic milieu, lecturing at some of the nation's most prestigious universities, but became a lively figure in the literary constellation clustered around the journal *Partisan Review.* She also did editorial work for Schocken publishers and served as the Executive Director of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Commission, established in 1947 to retrieve Jewish property confiscated by the Nazis. Arendt was personally involved in the reclamation of some 1,500,000 books of Hebraica and Judaica, more

than 1000 law scrolls, and countless ritual and artistic objects.[3] She attained wider fame – and notoriety! – after attending the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem for *New Yorker* magazine and subsequently publishing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), its most controversial theme signalled by the book's subtitle *A Report on the Banality of Evil.*

Apart from her doctoral thesis, her first extended work was *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewess*, completed during her years in Paris but not published until 1957. Varnhagen (1771-1833) was a Prussian-Jewish socialite who strove to assimilate into German culture but was excluded by the pervasive anti-Semitism of the day (comparatively mild compared to its later manifestations but bad enough). Arendt described Varnhagen as her 'closest friend, though she has been dead for some hundred years'.[4] Arendt's biography signalled her troubled interest in the volatile subject of 'Jewishness' and Jewish identity. In 1951 Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a searching study of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, followed in 1958 by *The Human Condition,* perhaps her most important philosophical work. 1961 saw the appearance of *On Revolution*, a comparative study of the American and French revolutions. Over the next decade several collections of essays appeared: *Between Past and Future*, *Men in Dark Times*, and *Crises of the Republic.* At the time of her death in 1975, she had written the first two volumes of a trilogy of philosophical works, and was working on the third. The first two volumes were posthumously published as *The Life of the Mind* (1978).

Part of Arendt's appeal as a thinker and writer is that she is impossible to pigeon-hole, either in terms of her disciplinary framework or her ideological disposition. Is she a philosopher, a political scientist, a historian of ideas, an exponent of *Kulturkritik,* an essayist, journalist or literary critic? The short answer is that she is all of these things without limiting herself to any particular field or disciplinary methodology. We also face some perplexity if we want to categorize her political/moral thinking with one of the conventional ideological labels; she draws on many different philosophies without cleaving to any. One of Arendt's biographers:

> She was not a feminist, a Marxist, a liberal, a conservative, Democrat or Republican. She loved the world and accepted what she understood to be the fundamental

> elements of the human condition: we do not exist alone, we are all different from one another, we appear, and we will disappear. In between we exist in a space of becoming and we have to care for the earth and build the world in common.[5]

She was variously described as 'a stage diva', 'Hannah Arrogant', a 'Weimar flapper', as 'demanding, unapologetic and opinionated', but no one doubted her intellectual horse-power, her seriousness and intensity, her unrelenting search for meaning. Allowed some over-simplification we might say that her writings are secular, humanistic, sometimes poetic. Her recurrent philosophical concerns focus on the nature of justice, power, evil, morality, freedom, and thinking itself while her abiding interest is in the political deformations of the 20th century. Arendt's work entails an unflinching confrontation with modernity, which is to say with the loss of tradition, particularly the metaphysical-philosophical lineage stretching back to Plato. (The erosion of religious faith, by contrast, seems to have been a matter of some indifference to her.) The political phenomena which attracted her most sustained inquiries include the rise of 'the masses', totalitarianism and the bureaucratized state, the dark intercourse of racism and nationalism (especially in anti-Semitic guise), and propaganda. Her aim was always to understand, to *comprehend* the fundamental tenor and meaning of these distinctly modern evils. 'Comprehension, in short,' she wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 'means the unpremeditated, attentive *facing up to*, and *resisting* of, reality – whatever it may be.' Her cast of mind is generally rationalist, sceptical, anti-progressive. Much of her political analysis and commentary takes on a new resonance in our own times which have seen, in many parts of the world, ugly resurgences of many of the developments which Arendt anatomized; we may here mention such all-too-familiar phenomena as authoritarian/fascistic political demagoguery, xenophobic nationalism, racism, public hysteria, dehumanized bureaucracy, social atomization, rampant consumerism, the destruction of time-honoured social bonds, the tyranny of ideology. Let's touch on a few of Arendt's recurrent concerns.

'The Banality of Evil'

Writing of Eichmann's final words at his trial in Jerusalem, Arendt declared that

> It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.

Eichmann in Jerusalem provoked a tempest of controversy, perhaps most dramatically manifested at the New York forum of Jewish intellectuals and writers, many of them colleagues and friends of Arendt, organized by *Dissent* magazine in response to Arendt's book. As the poet Robert Lowell described this event, 'the meeting was like a trial, the stoning of an outcast member of the family' while Mary McCarthy observed that the event 'assumed the proportions of a pogrom'.[6] The Jewish playwright Lionel Abel articulated the widely-shared outrage in New York Jewish circles when he accused Arendt of claiming that the Holocaust was banal, of finding the Nazis more sympathetic than their victims, and of blaming the Jewish people for their own sufferings. Arendt herself was deeply shocked but defiant. None of these incendiary charges can be justified by a sober reading of the book though she can certainly be accused of a lack of sensitivity, a certain tone-deafness and an uncharacteristic carelessness; nor can they be supported by reference to her other writings. In each case the allegation arises out of a partial misunderstanding of Arendt's nuanced and often ironic treatment of the issues at stake. Gershom Scholem pressed a more plausible charge when he wrote to Arendt in these terms:

> It is the heartless, the downright malicious tone you employ in dealing with the topic that so profoundly concerns the center of our life. There is something in the Jewish language that is completely indefinable, yet fully concrete – what the Jews call *ahavath Israel*, or love for the Jewish people. With you, my dear Hannah, as with so many intellectuals coming from the German left, there is no trace of it.[7]

Scholem broke off all relations with Arendt and published some of their correspondence without her permission. To his charge about

her apparent indifference to the Jewish people at large she was altogether ready to plead guilty, observing that she never loved any collective – race, nation or class, only individuals. However, here is not the place to mount either a prosecution or defence of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* but simply to ponder, for a moment, the weight of what became a signature phrase, 'the banality of evil'.

Many people supposed, I think wrongly but understandably, that in the elaboration of this theme Arendt was, in some measure, exculpating Eichmann and diminishing the enormity of his crimes. Arendt was painfully familiar with Eichmann's record and in no way sought to underplay it but she eschewed the kind of over-heated rhetoric often deployed in this context, believing that simply reviling Eichmann as a 'monster' or as an incarnation of some supernatural evil, what she called 'the demonic force', did little to help us understand him or his capacity for evil-doing, or indeed the Holocaust as a whole. Rather, she wanted to emphasize that great evil could be done by more or less normal people in whom the moral sense had altogether atrophied, if indeed it had ever been alive:

> The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.

Arendt's treatment of this idea recalls the words of Simone Weil in whose thought we find both radical convergences with and divergences from Arendt's outlook. But on this subject there is some overlap. Weil: 'Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating.'[8] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt had already written that 'The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.' Eichmann was a perfect specimen of the type. Now she wrote,

> Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all… He

> merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing… It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, this is still far from calling it commonplace… That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.

Totalitarianism, Propaganda, Ideology, Racism

The Origins of Totalitarianism is one of the key documents in the study of the political history of modernity. It probes the genealogy and pathology of the two dominant and most malignant totalitarian forms, Nazi Fascism and Stalinist Communism, the progenitors of the concentration camp and the Gulag. It is a long, dense, closely-argued book which doesn't lend itself to easy summarization. It presented a model of totalitarianism which identified some of the common features of Nazism and Stalinist Communism. At the time, given the wilful blindness of many Leftist intellectuals in the West, this was highly salutary. From our present vantage-point it might be said that her model oversimplified the case, erasing some of the significant differences between these two formations. Be that as it may, here I simply want to isolate two of its governing themes, bearing on ideology and propaganda. It is worth quoting Arendt at some length on the baleful influence of race and class-based ideology:

> For an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man. Few ideologies have won enough prominence to survive the hard competitive struggle of persuasion, and only two have come out on top and essentially defeated all others: the ideology which interprets history as an economic struggle of classes, and the other that interprets history as a natural fight of races. The appeal of both to large masses was so strong that they

> were able to enlist state support and establish themselves as official national doctrines. But far beyond the boundaries within which race-thinking and class-thinking have developed into obligatory patterns of thought, free public opinion has adopted them to such an extent that not only intellectuals but great masses of people will no longer accept a presentation of past or present facts that is not in agreement with either of these views.

Crucial to the rise of totalitarian states is the deployment of propaganda. How contemporary Arendt's diagnosis seems!

> Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.

Arendt's indictment of racism goes far beyond conventional critiques which focus of social and economic inequities and on the abuse of human rights; for Arendt unbridled racism, in its manifold forms, is a harbinger of the end not only of any stable polity, of any civilized society, but of humanity itself:

> Racism may indeed carry out the doom of the Western world and, for that matter, of the whole of human civilisation. When Russians have become Slavs, when Frenchmen have assumed the role of commanders of a *force noire*, when Englishmen have turned into 'white men,' as already for a disastrous spell all Germans became Aryans, then this change will itself signify the end of Western man. For no matter what learned scientists may say, race is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end, not the origin of peoples but their

> decay, not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death.

Not without some irony were allegations that Arendt's own understanding of Afro-American experience was stained with racist assumptions and blind-spots,[9] but nor is it particularly surprising; almost everyone, regardless of intelligence or creed or colour, has suffered *some* psychic contamination from the pervasive plague of racism. Nor should this apparent limit in Arendt's imaginative sympathies be allowed to subvert the force of her often penetrating insights into racism in general and anti-Semitism in particular.

*

Some Provocations and Aphorisms

Arendt has many piercing insights into all manner of socio-political subjects – the bureaucratization of public life, mass society, technocracy, consumerism – but she also reflected on less depressing subjects such as love, art, forgiveness and education as well as writing many reviews, occasional essays and even a little poetry. Her ambivalent and unconventional attitudes to Zionism and feminism are also not without interest. However, forceful as many of these writings are, they lie outside our present scope. But perhaps we can catch some glimpses of the tenor of her thinking in a more or less random compilation of quotations.

> • The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any.
>
> • Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men, so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationship with reality.
>
> • The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.
>
> • The greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted.

• The relatively new trouble with mass society is perhaps even more serious… because this society is essentially a consumers' society where leisure time is used no longer for self-perfection or acquisition of more social status, but for more and more *consumption* and more and more *entertainment*… a consumers' society cannot possibly know how to take care of a world and the things which belong exclusively to the space of worldly appearances, because its central attitude toward all objects, the attitude of consumption, spells ruin to everything it touches [italics mine].

• Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.

• Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable.

• Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence.

• Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical forces.

• Caution in handling generally accepted opinions that claim to explain whole trends of history is especially important for the historian of modern times, because the last century has produced an abundance of ideologies that pretend to be keys to history but are actually nothing but desperate efforts to escape responsibility.

• For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same.

• The greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons.

• Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty.

• Evil thrives on apathy and cannot survive without it.

• The ceaseless, senseless demand for original scholarship in a number of fields, where only erudition is now possible, has led either to sheer irrelevancy, the famous knowing of more and more about less and less, or to the development of a pseudo-scholarship which actually destroys its object.

• ...the solution to the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people.

• The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive), robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never existed.

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Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's door-stopper, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Yale University Press, 1982), remains the standard, if somewhat ponderous, biography. For a short biographical sketch and some commentary on Arendt's work see Samantha Rose Hill, *Hannah Arendt* (Reaktion Books, 2021). 'Tradition and the Modern Age', one of Weil's most important and interesting essays, first delivered as a lecture at Princeton University, can be found in *Writers & Politics: A Partisan Review Reader*, ed. Edith Kurzweil & William Phillips (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). Among the many on-line sources *Wikipedia* and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provide useful overviews.

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1 From *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

2 Fry's wartime exploits are recounted in Andy Marino, *A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry*, St Martin's Press, 1999.

3 Samnatha Rose Hill, *Hannah Arendt*, Reaktion Books, 2021, 118.

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7 Excerpt from Scholem's letter quoted in Hill, *Hannah Arendt*, 157.

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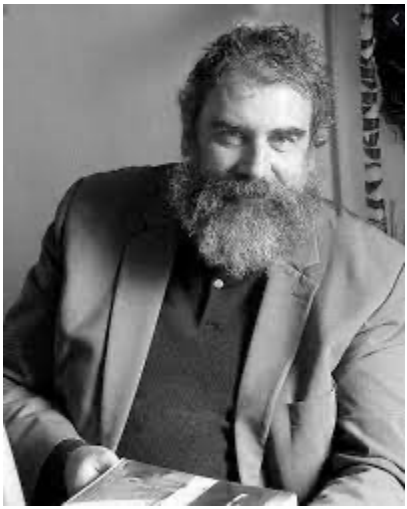
9 See Hill, *Hannah Arendt*, 148-152.

ALGIS UŽDAVINYS

1962-2010

In Memoriam



Algis Uždavinys was a Lithuanian philosopher and scholar who specialized in the study of ancient Greek and Egyptian religions and their relations with the esoteric dimensions of the Abrahamic traditions. The following piece was written after his death and published in *Sacred Web*, 27, 2011.

His Antipodean Sojourn

Picture a seminar room in a provincial Australian university where we find a group of students, postgraduates and staff members listening to a talk on ancient theurgy. Out front, a large, bearish man with a booming voice, a shaggy beard and unruly hair, energetically gesticulating as he answers a question about some recondite aspect of ancient Egyptian cosmology or Pythagorean mathematics or Babylonian funerary rites. Each question or comment from his interlocutors sets off a phosphoric chain-reaction of coruscating ideas, dazzling his listeners with the fizz and sparkle of his insights, his discourse punctuated with rumbling laughter. The discourse endlessly ramifies in many directions as the speaker explicates his subject with the most infectious enthusiasm.

In late 2007 Dr Algis Uždavinys joined the Philosophy & Religious Studies Program at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University, in central Victoria. He was appointed through the beneficence of a private donor who wanted to encourage the study of Tradition in all its manifold aspects. In this small but lively program Algis was able to find some kindred spirits who shared his unyielding conviction that there could be no more noble intellectual task than inquiry into the perennial wisdom which informs all integral mythological, religious and esoteric traditions. In Algis' case this primarily meant the study of the metaphysics, cosmology and occult religious practices of antiquity, a field in which he was already recognized as a leading authority and in which he published such works as *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Platonism* (2008), *Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (2010), *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* (2011) and *Ascent to Heaven in Islamic and Jewish Mysticism* (2011). More recently *Sufism and Ancient Wisdom* (2019) has appeared posthumously. He also edited two important collections, *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy* (2004) and *The Heart of Plotinus* (2009).

More than half a century ago, Ananda Coomaraswamy, the great art historian and perennialist, wrote this:

> …there is a universally intelligible language, not only verbal but also visual, of the fundamental ideas on which the different civilisations have been founded. There exists, then, in this commonly accepted axiology or body of first principles, a common universe of discourse… We need mediators to whom the common universe of discourse is still a reality.[1]

Algis was just such a mediator, an extraordinarily gifted one. He followed in the footsteps of such path-finders as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt as well as Coomaraswamy himself. And how appropriate it is that he is sometimes referred to in the sub-continent, where his work is widely acclaimed, as 'the new Coomaraswamy': we think of Algis' prodigious erudition, his pioneering work in art history, his intuitive penetration of the most dense and arcane symbolisms, his extraordinary facility with languages, his intimate familiarity with the sapiential movements within the great traditions of the East as well as the West, his ability to make accessible the most abstruse reaches of ancient metaphysics

and cosmology, his boundless intellectual energy and vitality. Indeed, it will not be remiss to recall the tribute paid to Coomaraswamy by another Lithuanian-born art historian, Meyer Schapiro, one which could no less fittingly apply to Algis Uždavinys:

> He was one of the luminaries of scholarship from whom we have all learned. And by the immense range of his studies and his persistent questioning of accepted values, he gave us an example of intellectual seriousness, rare among scholars today.[2]

Algis leaves behind a commanding body of work which will be his lasting legacy to those scholars and wayfarers who seek out the light of Tradition amidst the darkness of these latter days.

Let me now strike a more personal note. I did not know Algis well and my impressions are based on fugitive glimpses, so to speak, rather than on a close friendship. For me he always seemed a somewhat Dostoyevskian figure, a man of large appetites, generous spirit, an intense and passionate personality, often exuberant but also, behind the boisterous exterior, somewhat shy and vulnerable. The fixed stars in his life seemed to be his work, his family and his country whose troubled history had left its mark on his psyche. In lighter vein I also recall with some amusement his incompetence in the new-fangled technologies which clutter the academy nowadays, and his equally commendable indifference to the exigencies of the university bureaucracy. Teaching, researching, writing, helping colleagues and students – these remained his priorities, and he had no interest in the petty politics and personal ambitions which tarnish so much contemporary university life. In short, he was following a vocation, not pursuing a career.

I do not doubt that Algis' antipodean sojourn was intellectually stimulating, nor that he found considerable satisfaction in his collaborations with his new colleagues – and here one might mention the two distinguished articles he produced for *Eye of the Heart*. But the distance between Vilnius and Bendigo was perhaps even greater than he had imagined, and he found the separation from his wife and daughter especially painful. Then too, there were the inevitable difficulties and the loneliness of living in a new and in some respects strange culture. At times it must have felt like a kind of exile.

After his return to Lithuania we were alarmed to hear of his ill-health and, later, profoundly saddened to hear of his passing. Some

one once remarked that the death of a cultured man is akin to a library burning down, an especially apposite metaphor in this case. I know that my colleagues and our students will join me in giving thanks for the time Algis spent with us in Bendigo, in mourning his passing and in praying for his family. *Requiescat in pace.*

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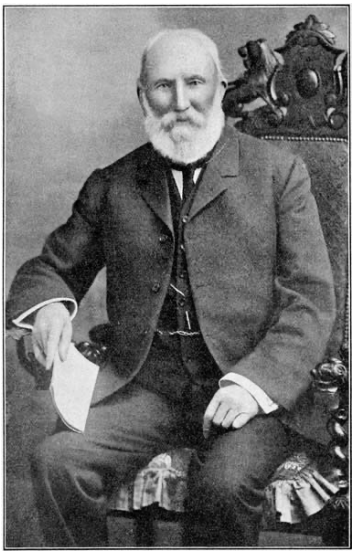
1 Ananda K Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 1979, 80 & 88.

2 Quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Princeton, 1977, 246.

R.H. MATHEWS

1841-1918

the grip of 'ethnomania'



... it is remarkable how little ill will the aborigines, as a rule, seem to have borne the white settlers, many of whom, it must be admitted, were greatly inferior, both in moral character and general manliness, to those whom they had deprived of their inheritance.[1]

Since the arrival of the Europeans, late in the 18th century, Australia's indigenous people have been the subject of feelings ranging from a sentimental romanticism to deep hostility and contempt.[2] The Aborigine has been cast in various roles: the 'Noble Savage'; a harmless and infantile figure of fun; an embodiment of all that is morally repugnant in man's nature; a relic of the Stone Age; a biological curio; a victim of a divine curse; a social misfit incapable of living a responsible and productive life. The stereotypes have changed under the pressure of new circumstances and the shifting ideological presuppositions of the observers but throughout them all

runs the persistent European failure to understand Aboriginal culture, in particular that network of beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships and patterned behaviours which made up their spiritual life. The factors which have shaped European attitudes are precisely those which have fuelled the ongoing cultural vandalism of modern, industrial societies against primal cultures across the globe. To name a few: ignorance about the culture in question; assumptions about the cultural superiority of modern, industrial civilisation, often buttressed by evolutionism of both a biological and social kind; the belief that European institutions marked the apotheosis of civilisation; an aggressive Christian exclusivism, operating as an accomplice to European colonialism; the inadequacies of the conceptual apparatus brought to the study of 'primitive' cultures; the notion that the extinction of the indigenous peoples of Australia was not only inevitable but divinely appointed.[3] The global decline of the 'darker races' was a theme which enjoyed widespread currency in the Victorian era. It is exemplified in the following claim, made by a writer in the late Victorian era:

> It seems a law of nature where two races whose stages of progression differ greatly are brought into contact, the inferior race is doomed to disappear... The process seems to be in accordance with a natural law which... is clearly beneficial to mankind at large by providing for the survival of the fittest. Human progress has all been achieved by the spread of the progressive race and the squeezing out of the inferior ones... It may be doubted that the Australian aborigine would ever have advanced much beyond the status of the neolithic races... we need not therefore lament his disappearance.[4]

The attitude to Aboriginal religion of most European observers has been 'a melancholy mixture of neglect, condescension and mis-understanding'.[5] From the outset there had been a stubborn, often wilful, refusal to acknowledge that the Aborigines had any religion at all. In 1798, for instance, an early colonist wrote:

> It has been asserted by an eminent divine, that no country has yet been discovered where some trace of religion was not to be found. From every observation and inquiry that I could make among these people, from the first to the last

> of my acquaintance with them, I can safely pronounce them an exception to this opinion. [6]

A militant Christian evangelism helped to erode the early Romantic image of the Noble Savage which had been derived, in large part, from the writings of Rousseau. (We should note in passing Frithjof Schuon's observation that although the Noble Savage motif was no doubt largely sentimental, it was not drawn entirely 'out of thin air'.[7]) With widespread missionizing activity in Australia and the Pacific came a reaction against romantic primitivism: to churchmen of evangelical persuasion it was less than proper that 'pagan savages' should be idealized as either noble or innocent.[8] The theme of the Aborigines' moral abasement was in vogue by mid-century and all manner of pseudo-Biblical rationales were invoked to legitimize racialist and self-interested prejudices.

The story of how the whites made the Aborigines exiles in their own land is, to say the least, a dismal one. The introduction of European diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza and syphilis, the rapacious appropriation of Aboriginal hunting grounds, the malign spread of alcohol and gunpowder, the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, brutal physical violence escalating into a program of genocidal extermination in parts of the continent,[9] institutionalized racial discrimination ranging from a well-intentioned but destructive paternalism to programs of vicious repression, the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, and governmental policies of 'assimilation' and 'integration' all played a significant role in this tragic story.[10] More crucial perhaps than any of these depredations has been the desecration of sacred sites without which Aboriginal spiritual life cannot survive. It is against this background that we should situate the work of RH Mathews, one man who played a heroic role in dismantling many of the ideas, assumptions and values which had fuelled the dark history of European relations with indigenous peoples. He did so by challenging and exposing some of the fundamental assumptions of Victorian anthropology, not as a fire-breathing crusader or polemicist but through his quiet, patient, open-minded study of Aboriginal culture throughout south-eastern Australia. The fact that much of his work was scorned at the time tells us a good deal about deeply-entrenched Victorian prejudices.

Let us return to the passage in the Mathews' writings from which our epigraph is taken:

> Indeed, when we bear in mind the undoubted wrong done to these simple, inoffensive people, it is remarkable how little ill will the aborigines, as a rule, seem to have borne the white settlers, many of whom, it must be admitted, were greatly inferior, both in moral character and general manliness, to those whom they had deprived of their inheritance.

Perhaps today these words will not strike us as remarkable but the fact that they came from a Victorian gentleman and anthropologist is indeed noteworthy. No doubt some readers will discern in the phrase 'these simple, inoffensive people' some trace of racial paternalism but those words should be much less arresting than the author's claim that the indigenous people whom he had been long studying at close quarters, were superior in 'moral character and general manliness' to many of their white contemporaries. Our purpose here is to sketch an outline of the life and work of this long-neglected surveyor-anthropologist, and to foreground the reasons why he was a much more significant figure than has, until recently, been generally recognized. It is only in recent years, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of historian Martin Thomas, that Mathews is beginning to receive his due.

There was little in the first five decades of Mathews' life to suggest that he would make such a major contribution to the study of Australia's indigenous people. His parents were Irish Protestants, the proprietors of a successful paper-making business in County Londonderry. Their efforts to avoid the oppressive paper tax earned them some notoriety before they came under suspicion of murdering an Excise Officer who was shot on their business premises. William Mathews was arrested but eventually released after the disappearance of a key witness. He and his wife fled to the remote colony of New South Wales, arriving in Sydney in 1840 and soon found work on the Camden property of John Macarthur.

Robert Hamilton Mathews, the third of five children, was born in 1841 in Narellan (now a suburb in southwest Sydney). His father worked as an itinerant rural labourer for several years before acquiring a farm in the southern tablelands, not far from the town of Goulburn. Robert was educated at home first by a tutor, an alcoholic 'remittance man', and then by his father who was a devoted classicist. Mathews was brought up in the Presbyterian Church, thoroughly versed in the Bible as well as the classics of antiquity, and remained

a church-goer, sometimes worshipping with Wesleyans and even Catholics despite the virulent sectarianism of the time.

Young Robert was attracted by the work of surveyors in the vicinity of the family property, and fixed on surveying as his future profession. But before that he worked as a drover and on farms in northern NSW and Queensland. By the time of his father's death in 1866 he had become an assistant surveyor and in 1870 passed the government exam to become a fully licensed surveyor, a career he successfully pursued, both in government service and private practice, for the next two decades. Mathews married in 1872 and fathered seven children. He worked in many parts of south-eastern Australia, amassed considerable wealth and was appointed as a Justice of the Peace and a stipendiary magistrate in both New South Wales and Queensland, a role exposing him to the sufferings of Aboriginal people. He also served as the deputy district coroner after moving to Singleton in 1880. In the early 80s Mathews and his wife toured in Europe, England and the United States as well as visiting his parents' hometown in Ireland, apparently oblivious to their allegedly criminal past. By one account they also visited Africa though this is uncertain.

Mathews' work as surveyor frequently brought him into contact with indigenous people in whom his interest grew over the years, prompting him to collect their artefacts and gather data about their languages and ceremonies. In 1875 he joined the Royal Society of NSW. However, until the early 1890s Mathews' aboriginal research was a side-line, amateur anthropology as a kind of hobby, albeit one with serious intent. But then, quite suddenly it seems, he was seized by what Martin Thomas has called 'ethnomania', an almost obsessive pursuit not only of data but of a deeper and *sympathetic understanding* of the Aboriginal people throughout south-eastern Australia. He remained a self-taught anthropologist with no formal or academic training, no doubt a factor in the hostility which his work aroused in some quarters. Nothing like an autodidactic surpassing his 'betters' to arouse scepticism and professional jealousy – a story which repeats itself all too often in the annals of Australian anthropology. (For a compelling account of another anthropologist whose work was mired in controversy, sometimes at his own hand, one might turn to Barry Hill's superb study, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, 2002.)

Mathews' 'ethnomania' seems to have been catalyzed when, surveying a property in the Hunter Valley, he was exposed to what Thomas describes as 'one of the great Aboriginal art sites of eastern Australia'.[11] Mathews wrote a paper about these spectacular rock paintings for the Royal Society, subsequently publishing it in the Society's journal in 1893. In the following year he wrote a more detailed analysis which was awarded The Society's Bronze Medal. No stopping him now! He retired from surveying and devoted himself to his anthropological researches. Between 1893 and his death in 1918, going at a fair clip, he amassed no less than 171 publications. Many of these were articles and pamphlets concerned with kinship systems, totems and marriage rules but also covered many other aspects of Aboriginal life including initiation ceremonies, mythology, cosmology, folklore, languages, and cultural diffusion. He was also one of the first Europeans to take a serious interest in 'secret women's business'.

Mathews anthropological work could hardly be described as a 'career', and therein lies a key to his singular importance. His lack of formal professional training meant that he did not fall prey to the prevailing fashions in anthropology, leaving him free of the theoretical circumscriptions which distorted the work of many of his more illustrious co-workers in the field. His professional ambitions had already been satisfied – no need to climb any ladder – and his own financial security was a warrant of his independence in thought and deed.

The story of the ways in which his work was treated by the anthropological establishment with condescension, disdain, ridicule, sometimes contempt, is too complex to unravel here. That sorry story has been well told by Martin Thomas in his splendid study *The Many Worlds of R.H. Mathews: In search of an Australian anthropologist* (2011), one of the landmark works in the study of Australian anthropology's chequered history. It brings no credit to many of the leading figures in the field. Among those who disparaged his work, sometimes for theoretical and, we might even say, ideological reasons as well as for more distasteful personal motives, the most conspicuous were Baldwin Spencer and AW Howitt – but there were many others, including WE Roth. In more recent times Diane Barwick has unfairly stigmatized the work of Mathews.

In a letter to Howitt, Spencer, 'one of the brightest stars in the anthropological firmament',[12] wrote, 'I don't know whether to admire

most his impudence his boldness or his mendacity – they are all of a very high order and seldom combined in so high a degree in one mortal man'.[13] Spencer dismissed Mathews as a kind of parasite, an amateur living off the work of professional scholars. This self-interested accusation was not only mean-spirited but altogether false. As Mathews' obituarist rightly observed, 'His investigations were, with very few exceptions, carried out by personal interviews with the natives themselves, and he spared no labour to make his information absolutely reliable before embodying it in his writings',[14] a claim endorsed by a recent scholar who notes that Mathews was 'by character reticent, methodical and independent' and 'prided himself on ascertaining the facts from the Aborigines themselves, and testing all accepted theories'.[15] Mathews himself wrote that,

> Ever since 1898 the fact has been thrust upon me that Spencer and Howitt looked upon me as 'the opposition candidate' and never lost a chance of doing me an injury. I was thus kept continually 'on my mettle' and took every precaution – double precautions – to keep my statements unassailable.[16]

Privately Spencer waged a vitriolic campaign against Mathews both in Australia and overseas. He wrote, for instance, to Sir James G. Frazer urging him to never quote Mathews' publication nor to acknowledge his work in any way. Unfortunately, Frazer obliged.

Howitt, at one time on friendly terms with Mathews, turned against him, partly under Spencer's influence, partly because Mathews had presented some perfectly respectful disagreements about kinship systems in southern Queensland. In his massive work, *The Natives Tribes of South-East Australia* (1904), Howitt made not a single mention of Mathews, not even a fugitive footnote, despite the fact that Mathews had published more than 100 anthropological studies, many of them ground-breaking, work from which Howitt had undoubtedly profited although he later claimed, implausibly, that he had only read two of Mathews' articles, 'neither of which recommended itself to me by its accuracy'.[17] Howitt's claim that he was not familiar with Mathews' work was actually a brazen lie.[18] On his deathbed Howitt composed a denunciation of Mathews which he sent to most of the leading anthropologists of the day.

Mathews himself was not above voicing some ferocious criticism of Spencer and Howitt, sometimes descending into personal abuse,

but, given the circumstances, one's sympathies lie with Mathews, reinforced by the fact that, as far as I can discern, Mathews was more often on the right side of the issues at stake in his troubled relationships with the big guns in the anthropological establishment. But it must be conceded that Mathews' temperament was not of a conciliatory nature. Here is a short description from his son William:

> Owing doubtless to the fact that he was what usually is known as a self-contained man, RHM felt little or no desire to seek the society of his fellows, but rather was disposed to avoid them as much as he reasonably could … For, to be quite candid, RHM was inclined – frequently, it must be admitted with good reason – to look upon the majority of people with considerable disdain, if not with something very akin to contempt.[19]

Sometimes his 'considerable disdain' intruded into his writings. Andrew Lang, for instance, generally quite sympathetic to Mathews' work, noted that he sometimes wrote 'in a tone which showed the character of the man'.[20] Mathews was not adept in his professional relationships; he was not versed in the art of diplomacy. This was not helpful at a time when 'The pool of researchers was small but fractious, with the central players competing on an array of fronts: for correspondents, for international patronage, and for access to Aboriginal people themselves.'[21] Nonetheless, he enjoyed more cordial relations with some others working in the ethnographical field, among them Daisy Bates, the Rev. John Mathew, WJ Enright, the German ethnographer Moritz von Leonhardi and the English folklorist ES Hartland. But tellingly, none of these were professional big-wigs. More importantly, in his dealings with Aboriginal people Mathews was courteous, sensitive, kindly and punctilious in respecting their etiquette and social protocols.[22] It helped that he *liked* Aboriginal folk and valued their friendship. He was known by some tribes as 'Birrarak', in traditional lore a being who 'combined the functions of the seer, the spirit-medium and the bard' (the description, ironically enough, comes from Howitt).[23] As Thomas notes,

> Here is rare and compelling evidence of how Mathews was regarded by in an Aboriginal community. As a person who moved between worlds he could facilitate the transmission of understandings. In that intermediate

> capacity he evidently encouraged a two-way traffic in ways of speaking, singing and moving.[24]

It would seem, in today's argot, that he presented 'the best version of himself' in his dealings with Aborigines and his less attractive characteristics in his relations with many of his fellow anthropologists.

Despite Mathews' prodigious labours, his work was only once published in book form, *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria* (1905), an unhappy state of affairs not remedied until the publication of *Culture in Translation: The anthropological legacy of R.H. Mathews* (2007), edited by his tireless advocate, Martin Thomas.

One of the crucial intellectual factors at work in the general rejection of Mathews' work, along with his maverick status as an outsider, was his courageous refusal to accept many of the tenets of the pervasive evolutionism of the period, in both its biological-Darwinian and social-Spencerian modes. In this respect he was way ahead of his time. Not everyone succumbed to the anthropological prejudices of the day and Mathews was not without his champions though they were few in number during his own lifetime.

It was more than three decades after Mathews' passing that AP Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University, himself the victim of professional jealousies and spiteful sniping within the academy, came to Mathews' defence. (As is well-known, Elkin himself could be a prickly customer who antagonized many of his colleagues.[25] What is it with captious anthropologists?) Amongst other things, Elkin exposed the way in which the work of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, one of the most influential anthropological theorists of the 20thC (and Elkin's predecessor in the chair at Sydney University), was indebted to Mathews – a debt which Radcliffe-Brown himself had failed to acknowledge. It was also in the 1950s that Mathews belatedly found another defender in Norman Tindale who wrote that,

> Going through Mathews' papers… I have been more than ever impressed with the vast scope and general accuracy of this work. Despite earlier critics I am coming to believe he was our greatest recorder of primary anthropological data.[26]

More recently Mathews' work has been thoroughly assessed and his life story sympathetically told by Martin Thomas who, more or less single-handedly, has rehabilitated Mathews' reputation as not only an observer but a friend of the indigenous peoples. Henry Reynolds, the pioneering historian of frontier conflicts in the Australian colonies, reviewing Thomas's book, says this:

> With *The Many Worlds of RH Mathews*, Martin Thomas has brought back anthropologist Robert Hamilton Mathews from almost total obscurity. Thomas has pursued his man with forensic intensity, and astutely located him in time and place. This alone is a significant achievement. But in so doing he examines many wider themes that inhere in the story.

Our sketch of 'this quixotic and extremely private man'[27] was conceived as a modest homage to Mathews but it can also serve as a tribute to Thomas' heroic labours without which our understanding of Mathews would not only be meagre but remain distorted by his 'extremely unsavoury treatment at the hands of his contemporaries'.[28]

Principal Sources

The indispensable work on Mathews is Martin Thomas' *The Many Worlds of R.H. Mathews: In search of an Australian anthropologist* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), a sympathetic but clear-eyed study informed by formidable research. In the course of his inquiries Thomas also wrote an illuminating article about the internecine feuding of the Victorian era, 'R.H. Mathews and anthropological warfare: on writing the biography of a 'self-contained man'', *Aboriginal History*, 2004, Vol 28. We are further indebted to Thomas for editing a collection of Mathews' papers that first appeared in German and French, *Culture in Translation: The anthropological legacy of R.H. Mathews* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007) and in which we find a quite detailed account of Mathews, but one more compressed than in *The Many Worlds.* Isabel McBryde's entry on Mathews in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in 1974 was an important step in bringing Mathews' work back into the light. The *Wikipedia* entry, probably written by Thomas, provides an excellent overview. Readers interested in the general field of Australian anthropology might turn to Barry Hill's tremendous study of the younger Strehlow, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possessions*.

1 *R.H. Mathews Papers* (held in the National Library), quoted in Martin Thomas, *The Many Worlds of R.H. Mathews*, 2011, 360.

2 The introduction to this essay is reproduced, with some changes, from my 'Melodies from the Beyond: Aboriginal Religion in Schuonian Perspective' in *Touchstones of the Spirit,* 2012, 3-22.

3 See the historical survey of European attitudes in Tony Swain, *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion,* Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1985.

4 *The Age* January 11th, 1889, quoted in Henry Reynolds (ed), *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders,* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 9.

5 Max Charlesworth: *Religion in Aboriginal Australia,* ed M. Charlesworth et al., St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984, 1.

6 David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, 1798, quoted in W.E.H. Stanner, 'Religion, totemism and symbolism' in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia,* 138. Such a view is echoed in the words of an otherwise sympathetic missionary, writing in the mid-19th century: 'The Aborigines of New Holland, in this part of the Colony, have no priesthood, no altar, no sacrifice, nor any religious service, strictly so-called; their superstitious observances can scarcely be designated as divine rites being only mysterious works of darkness, revellings and suchlike'; L.E. Threlkeld, quoted in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia,* 2.

7 Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990, 77.

8 The role of Christian missionaries and their impact on Aboriginal culture is a complex one which has been vastly oversimplified by apologists on both sides of the fence. It would certainly be misleading to suggest that the role of the missionaries was entirely destructive. In some areas the missionaries were instrumental in providing a refuge in which Aboriginal people were able to survive physically and in which at least some remnants of traditional culture were preserved. Nonetheless, a good deal of evil was perpetrated in the name of Christianity. For a balanced discussion of this issue see Monica Furlong, *The Flight of the Kingfisher*, 1996, esp. Ch 4.

9 As late as 1902 white commentators were still justifying the deliberate killing of Aborigines in terms such as these: 'The substitution of more than a million of industrious and peaceful people for a roaming, fighting contingent of six thousand cannot be said to be dearly purchased even at the cost of the violent deaths of a fraction of the most aggressive among them.' H.A. Turner, *History of the Colony of Victoria,* Vol 1, London, 1902, 239, quoted in *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders,* 9.

10 As well as the work by Reynolds already cited see Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier,* Ringwood: Penguin, 1982, and a number of Reynolds' more recent works. See also C.D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society,* Ringwood: Penguin, 1972.

11 Martin Thomas, Preface to *Culture in Translation: The anthropological legacy of R.H. Mathews*, 2007, ed. Martin Thomas, 31.

12 Martin Thomas, Preface to *Culture in Translation,* 5.
13 'Robert Hamilton Mathews', *Wikipedia.*
14 Martin Thomas, Preface to *Culture in Translation, 5.*
15 Isabel McBryde, 'Mathews, Robert Hamilton (1841-198)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 5, 1974.
16 Letter to E.S. Hartland, quoted by Martin Thomas in 'R.H. Mathews and anthropological warfare: on writing the biography of a "self-contained man"', *Aboriginal History*, 2004, Vol 28, 23.
17 'Robert Hamilton Mathews', *Wikipedia.*
18 Martin Thomas, Preface to *Culture in Translation,* 12.
19 Ibid, 13.
20 Ibid*,* 14.
21 Ibid*,* 15.
22 See Draft Report by Natalie Kowk, *Considering Traditional Aboriginal Affiliations in the ACT Region*, Canberra: ACT Government, February 2013, 10; www.cmd.act.gov.au.
23 Quoted in Martin Thomas, Preface to *Culture in Translation,* 19.
24 Ibid*,* 20.
25 Readers interested in Elkin's place in Australian anthropology might turn to my own brief essay on him in *Against the Tide: Sketches of Modern Christian Thinkers*, Bendigo: Carbarita Press, 2022. A fuller but often unsympathetic account can be found in Tigger Wise, *The Self-made Anthropologist: a life of A.P. Elkin*, 1985.
26 *Wikipedia*.
27 The phrase comes from Martin Thomas, Preface, *Culture in Translation.*
28 Martin Thomas, 'R.H. Mathews and anthropological warfare', 1.

JOHN NEIHARDT

1881-1973

Chronicler of *Black Elk Speaks*

I saw more than I can tell
and I understood more than I saw;
for I was seeing in a sacred manner …
(Black Elk as rendered by John Neihardt)

Crazy Horse, Red Cloud and Sitting Bull were the most renowned Lakota of the 19th century; Black Elk became the most celebrated of the 20th. Indeed, no other Native American of any tribe has attained the status of Black Elk in the last half-century. Unlike most of the Indians who have a prominent place in the popular American consciousness – Tecumseh, Geronimo, Cochise, Chief Joseph, to name a few – Black Elk was not a great warrior chief but a *wicasa wakan*, a holy man. His life was governed by a mystical vision which he experienced as a boy. Like Socrates, Jesus and the Buddha, Black Elk himself wrote nothing. His fame rests largely on *Black Elk Speaks*, a recounting of his early life narrated to the Nebraskan poet, John G. Neihardt, and first published in 1932. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, was an early enthusiast and compared Black Elk's Great

Vision to those of Ezekiel and Zechariah in the Old Testament.[1] Thanks largely to Jung's efforts the book was translated into German although it did not appear in published form until 1953.[2] But generally the book attracted only scattered attention and was soon remaindered. It was not until the counter-cultural ferment of the late 1960s that it commanded the interest of activists, seekers and scholars alike, igniting widespread acclaim. Over the last half-century it has become a classic text, 'arguably the single most widely read book in the vast literature relating to North American Indians.'[3] Black Elk himself 'has acquired the status of a mythological figure': 'European Americans have fixed on Black Elk as a primary image by which they feel linked to the traditional world of the native peoples of North America. For them Black Elk represents quintessential Indianness by his nineteenth-century Lakota origins, his association with storied events such as the Battle of Little Bighorn and the massacre at Wounded Knee, and by his status as a visionary'.[4] Less well-known but equally important is *The Sacred Pipe*, first published in 1952. It gives a detailed account of the seven primary rituals of the Lakota, as told to Joseph Epes Brown by the old medicine man in his last years. *The Sacred Pipe* provides an exposition not only of the rites but of the whole spiritual economy of the Lakota and of the wider cultural group to which they belonged, the Plains Indians.

Dale Stover has identified four phases in the popular and scholarly reception of *Black Elk Speaks*. The first period foregrounds the romantic motifs of the 'noble savage' and 'the vanishing Indian.' The counter-culture, the Native American cultural resurgence and the political activism of the 60s and 70s provide the context for the second phase in which Black Elk becomes mythologized as 'the archetypal Indian' and *Black Elk Speaks* becomes a privileged literary text. Vine Deloria Jr called it 'a North American bible of all Tribes'[5] and 'the standard by which other efforts to tell the Indian story are judged.'[6] Raymond DeMallie's publication of *The Sixth Grandfather* (1984), the full unedited transcript of Black Elk's testimony, inaugurates the third period, one marked by scholarly controversies about the genesis, authenticity and significance of Black Elk's mediated narratives, and about his hitherto obscured conversion to Catholicism. Lastly, in Stover's schema, comes a postcolonial re-reading of Black Elk and his legacy, rejecting 'the hegemonic assumptions of European American discourse' and inviting a new, more respectful and egalitarian dialogue in which Native American

agency is more fully recognized. Most commentators throughout these phases have, at the least, treated Black Elk and his testimony with considerable respect. But we should also take note of the dissenters. For instance, John Fire Lame Deer, who himself attained some celebrity as a Native American visionary, dismissed Black Elk as 'a catechism teacher' and a 'cigar-store Indian,'[7] while William Powers indicts *Black Elk Speaks* as a 'fabrication of the white man.'[8] Powers asseverates that it belongs with 'other books written by white men for a white audience' in which 'the ideas, plots, persons, and situations of these books have been constructed to conform to the expectations of a white audience.'[9]

Who was 'the real Black Elk'? This remains a vexed question, one I have attempted to answer in some detail in my book *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary* (2018). Here our focus turns not to the holy man but to his friend, witness and collaborator, John Neihardt.

Life and Work

John Gneisenau Neihardt was born, in 1881, in a farm shack in Sharpsburg, Illinois. After John's father abandoned his family they moved firstly to Kansas City, Missouri, and then to Wayne, Nebraska, to live with relatives in a one-room sod house. Despite some early illness, Neihardt was physically tough and as a youth trained as a boxer and wrestler. In time he became a newspaper editor, poet, critic, historian, ethnographer, philosopher and academic. He was a voracious reader and accumulated a personal library of some 5,000 books.[10] Above all he understood himself as an artist 'who believed art was the conduit to spirituality and the "higher values," who distrusted institutional religion but was reverent. He believed in the visionary and paranormal.'[11] He had an abiding interest in the European settlement of the West, and in the culture and fate of the indigenous peoples. Neihardt travelled extensively through the West but his interests extended beyond his native country, evident in his very first publication, *The Divine Enchantment*, a poetic rendition of some ancient Hindu myths. (He was later embarrassed by this work and destroyed whatever copies he could find.)

Neihardt's home during his early adult years was Bancroft, Nebraska, where he settled with his wife Mona (née Martinson), a student of the great sculptor, August Rodin. They married in 1908 and had four children, two of whom, Enid and Hilda, were to assist Neihardt in his great work with Black Elk. Neihardt travelled two

thousand miles down the Missouri by open boat,[12] conducted extensive researches throughout the Plains and the Rocky Mountains, encountered many Indian tribes, and nurtured particularly close relationships with the Omaha. Later in life he lived in Branson and Columbia, Missouri, before spending his final years in Lincoln, Nebraska. After the publication of *Black Elk Speaks* he completed *The Song of Messiah* in 1935. He returned to work on the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* before being employed by John Collier as the director of the Bureau of Information within the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Neihardt visited Black Elk again in 1944, gathering material for *When the Tree Flowered* in which he aimed to depict the whole way of life of the Sioux in the days before the Indian Wars. In 1921 the Nebraska legislature elected Neihardt the state's poet-laureate, a position he held until his death in 1973. He was showered with many literary awards and honours but it was only in the last few years of his life that Neihardt became widely-known as the author of the recently reprinted *Black Elk Speaks* and as a guest on the Dick Cavett Show.[13]

Neihardt's many publications run to some twenty-five volumes across several genres – journalism, epic poems, short stories, novels, plays, travelogues, philosophy. His best-known works are *The Song of the Indian Wars* (1925), *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), *The Song of the Messiah* (1935), *A Cycle of the West* (1949), the *magnum opus* on which he worked for thirty years, and *When the Tree Flowered* (1952), the second of his books dealing with the Sioux.[14]

Neihardt and 'Black Elk Speaks'

In 1930 Neihardt was in Missouri researching the Ghost Dance movement for *The Song of the Messiah*, and looking for 'long hairs' who still remembered the old days. His investigations led him to the South Dakota Pine Ridge Agency where he was told of an old 'unreconstructed' Indian, Nicholas Black Elk.[15] Hilda Neihardt later described her father at this time:

> … he was not a large man, but he was very strong, very intense, with wavy blond air that had darkened to a sandy brown and bright blue eyes that revealed his enthusiasm for the job he had undertaken. With a background of some thirty years of friendship with the Omaha and Sioux peoples, during which he had gained an appreciation for them and for their cultures that was rare indeed in those times, he was ideally suited for the task at hand. That Black Elk had intuitively

> known this about Neihardt on their first meeting proved to be the remarkable beginning to this whole story.[16]

Black Elk had earlier been quite adamant in refusing a request from writers Eleanor Hinman and Mari Sandoz to tell them his story.[17] He was much more sympathetic to Neihardt. At their first meeting Black Elk told the poet,

> There is much to teach you. What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I will be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so that I can teach you.[18]

The two soon formed a close friendship and an 'inexplicable rapport,'[19] the old Indian naming Neihardt 'Flaming Rainbow.' Henceforth Black Elk referred to Neihardt as 'son' or 'nephew', and Neihardt called the old man 'uncle'. Neihardt himself had, during a fever at the age of eleven, experienced a powerful vision which he related to Black Elk and which he later incorporated in his poem 'The Ghostly Brother.'[20] As DeMallie observes, 'The mystic in Neihardt and the mystic in Black Elk were kindred souls.'[21] Their interactions were marked by 'intuitive understanding and spiritual kinship' and by 'a growing awareness of their joint calling.'[22] Here is Neihardt's account of his initial meeting with the old Lakota:

> He struck me as being a bit uncanny in his intuitions; not that he favored me, but that he seemed to know what was inside the visitor. He told me – the sphinx-like old chap – that as he sat there, he felt in my heart a very strong will to know the things of the other world and that a spirit, which stood behind me, had forced me to come to him that I might learn a little from him. In spite of the sound of this statement, he was very modest, modest as a man may be who is sure of what he knows and that what he knows is worth knowing . . . He seemed to be expecting me and welcomed me as though he had seen me often.[23]

Black Elk addressed the following words to Neihardt: 'You are a word-sender. The earth is like a garden and over it your words go like rain making it green and after your words have passed the memory of them will stand long in the West like a Flaming Rainbow.'[24] Of the providential encounter of Neihardt and the Oglala holy man Frank Waters has written,

> It may seem strange that [Black Elk] told this vision to a white man, a member of the race that had ruthlessly crushed underfoot the proud Sioux nation during its imperial march across the North American continent. Yet the Powers Above which mysteriously prescribe the successive rise and fall of nations and civilisations, often pick unwitting agents and spokesmen to further the ever-evolving consciousness of mankind towards transcendent completeness.[25]

Neihardt conducted many long and detailed conversations with Black Elk about his early life. Also present throughout most of Black Elk's narration were his son Ben, who translated his father's words into English,[26] Neihardt's daughters Hilda and Enid, who recorded Ben's translation, and one of Black Elk's closest and most trusted friends, Stephen Standing Bear,[27] whose presence was for Black Elk a warrant of the veracity of his account. (It was Standing Bear who provided the illustrations for the first edition of *Black Elk Speaks*.) Several other Lakota elders were also intermittently present. Neither Ben nor any of Black Elk's friends had ever previously heard him describe his Great Vision. In 1911 Charles Eastman had written that 'sometimes an old man, standing upon the brink of eternity, might reveal to a chosen few the oracle of his long-past youth.'[28] Such was the case here. As DeMallie observes, 'It was as if something long bound up inside the old man had broken free at last, an impulse to save that entire system of knowledge that his vision represented and that for more than twenty-five years he had denied.'[29] Black Elk was 'tying together the ends of his life.'[30] Neihardt exclaimed to his daughters that 'I just cannot *believe* the beauty and the meaning of what is coming out of the old man's head. I know of no other vision in religious literature that is equal to this.'[31] Soon after he wrote to his friend Julian House, describing the Great Vision as 'a marvellous thing, vast in extent, full of profound significance and perfectly formed. If it were literature instead of a dance ritual, it would be a literary masterpiece.'[32]

It now became Neihardt's sacred duty to capture 'the beauty and meaning' of Black Elk's testimony; in so doing he and Black Elk would indeed create 'a literary masterpiece.' As Brian Holloway has so persuasively observed, 'What Neihardt sought in presenting Black Elk (and others) was to give readers a glimpse of a total, powerful, ineffable world – a world that could not be described simply by the

everyday language of history and observation but that could be accessed through the medium of poetry and other arts that, Neihardt believed, served as conduits to enhanced consciousness.'[33]

The transcription taken from Enid's stenographic notes formed the basis for *Black Elk Speaks*, which Neihardt wrote in an inspired frenzy between June and October 1931.[34] Much controversy has attended the role of Neihardt in creating *Black Elk Speaks*. The book itself draws directly only on a portion of Black Elk's reminiscences which did not see the light of day in complete form until the publication of *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (1984). This volume included Neihardt's interviews with Black Elk in 1944 when the poet again visited the holy man.

In May 1931, after Black Elk had completed his long and exhausting reminiscences over sixteen days,[35] the holy man, his son Ben, Neihardt and his daughters traveled to the Black Hills and climbed Harney Peak,[36] the centre of the world to which Black Elk had been transported in his Great Vision. There the old man prayed to the Grandfather Tunkashila, the Great Spirit, concluding with these words:

> With tears running, O Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather – with running tears I must say now that the tree has never bloomed. A pitiful old man, you see me here, and I have fallen away and have done nothing. Here at the center of the world, where you took me when I was young and taught me; here, old, I stand, and the tree is withered, Grandfather, my Grandfather… In sorrow I am sending a feeble voice, O Six Powers of the World. Hear me in my sorrow, for I may never call again. O make my people live.'[37]

Black Elk's prayer on Harney Peak would form the final chapter of *Black Elk Speaks*, 'a prose poem of lamentation for the dead and for a vanished age.'[38]

Controversies

In compiling *Black Elk Speaks* John Neihardt selected only parts of Black Elk's narration. Describing his own role Neihardt later said that

> *Black Elk Speaks* is a work of art with two collaborators, the chief one being Black Elk. My function was both creative and editorial… The beginning and end of the book

> are mine; they are what he would have said had he been able… And the translation – or rather the transformation – of what was given me was expressed so that it could be understood by the white world.[39]

Elsewhere he wrote, 'It was my function to translate the old man's story, not only in the factual sense – *for it was not the facts that mattered most* – but rather to recreate in English the mood and manner of the old man's narrative.'[40] Neihardt's role in *retelling* Black Elk's story has come under severe scrutiny in the last few decades. His rendition of Black Elk's testimony has been subjected to relentless interrogation and criticism over the last few decades. (I have discussed many of these critiques in *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary*.)

There can be no doubt that Neihardt left a subjective imprint on Black Elk's testimony. How could he not? He brought to his task his own motives, assumptions, values and, no doubt, some of the prejudices of the age; he was existentially involved in this project. But the question remains: how much weight should be assigned to the various censures made of Neihardt, who has been so central to the preservation of Black Elk's legacy? My own view, stated briefly, is that the controversies of the last twenty-five years of Black Elk-Neihardt scholarship, while often instructive, have obscured one central and abiding truth: Black Elk was heir to a primordial wisdom which we are in a much better position to understand because of the profoundly important work of Neihardt; this remains the case in spite of the inevitable limitations and imperfections in the work he carried out. Thanks to his intelligence, empathy, creativity and dedication we have in *Black Elk Speaks* a monument of the Lakota tradition which will still be standing when the scholarly feuds have been long forgotten. As Brian Holloway has tartly remarked, 'Neither the arcana of neoscholastic deconstruction nor the colonialist desire to appropriate *Black Elk Speaks* for sectarian causes has produced much more than sets of opposites annihilating each other.'[41] In any case, the main quarry should not be Neihardt but the ancestral wisdom vouchsafed to Black Elk. Moreover, one can only concur with the wise words of Vine Deloria Jr:

> The very nature of great religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the

> transcendent truth that is expressed. So let it be with *Black Elk Speaks*… That [it] speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the best that dwells within is sufficient.[42]

It might also be said that *Black Elk Speaks* and the *wicasa-wakan* himself transcend and overwhelm the critical categories of recent scholarship.

Much commentary over the last half-century is littered with an altogether dismissive attitude to the idea of the 'noble savage,' often seen as a sentimental and fanciful idea associated with a 'romantic' outlook – a kind of childishness attributed to both Neihardt and Joseph Brown which, it is supposed, we have now outgrown. One might almost say that this has become the very calling-card of Black Elk scholars. Frithjof Schuon offers this corrective:

> It is a curious fact that many people love the Indians, but that hardly anyone dares admit it; unless they admit it with certain reservations, which all too ostentatiously allow them to disidentify themselves from Rousseau's 'good savage' as well as from Cooper's 'noble savage'; no one wishes to be taken for a child. Doubtless there is nothing worth retaining in the unrealistic sentimentalities of a Rousseau, and the least that can be said is that the Indians have no need of them; but as for the 'noble savage,' this idea is not drawn entirely 'out of thin air,' if only for the simple reason that warlike peoples, by the very fact that they regularly and vocationally court suffering and death and have a cult of self-mastery, possess nobility and grandeur by the nature of things.[43]

One of the more interesting commentators on *Black Elk Speaks* is the Italian philosopher and historian of religions, Elémire Zolla (1926-2002). In *The Writer and the Shaman* (1969) Zolla evinces little enthusiasm for Neihardt's work as a whole, poetic and otherwise, finding him an 'undistinguished' writer, the aspiring 'romantic bard' of the 'Aryan' subjugation of the West, a versifier of 'pantingly fierce tone' and 'clumsy magniloquence.' Despite his deep knowledge of Indian ways and his generous sympathy for their culture, Neihardt's work, both before and after his encounter with Black Elk, is, in Zolla's

view, fatally marred by a fault shared by so many commentators, today as then:

> . . . what is missing is the one thing that would transcend the limitations of entertainment literature with all that is catchily superficial patchwork in it: the abandonment of the point of view of 'civilisation'. Neihardt could not reach it by himself. In middle age, however, he was singularly fortunate. He encountered a sublime religious figure, Black Elk . . . [44]

Otherwise, says Zolla, Neihardt might well have remained 'the regional storyteller of Nebraska and one of the last provincial versifiers',[45] or in the dismissive words of Mick McAllister, 'a minor anachronism of a poet'.[46] (It should be noted that Zolla's assessment of Neihardt's literary standing is not shared by a good many distinguished writers and scholars – Scott Momaday, Frank Waters, Alvin Josephy Jr, Dee Brown and Vine Deloria Jr among them – who have found much to admire, and several of whom have argued that Neihardt's modest literary reputation is not commensurate with his achievement.)

Zolla's reading of Neihardt accounts for many tensions and paradoxes in Neihardt's life and work which have puzzled writers in this field. It also disarms those critiques which rest on biographical and textual evidence from the rest of Neihardt's output. We can concede that much of Neihardt's work is marred by his own predilections and by the contemporary prejudices to which he was not altogether immune, although it must also be said that many scholars have imprisoned an imaginary Neihardt in an ideological/theological straitjacket of their own making. At various points Neihardt has been seen as triumphalist racist, Christian providentialist, socialist firebrand, a romantic reactionary, a rabid progressivist, literary fraudster, neo-Platonist, a crypto-Marxist, an evangelical Puritan, a colonialist oppressor, and as a proto-New Ager! In fact Neihardt was a complex personality with a supple sensibility, certainly not a rigid ideologue or crusader to be so easily pigeon-holed. But leaving aside the questions raised by these simplistic and contradictory characterisations, *Black Elk Speaks* is a *singular* work: it is *only* in this work that Neihardt meets Zolla's fundamental criterion for any adequate understanding of Lakota tradition, precisely 'the abandonment of the point of view of civilisation.'

Neihardt's writing in this particular text was *inspired* – 'in-the-spirit' – in a way which is clearly not the case elsewhere in his uneven *oeuvre*. And the key surely is Black Elk himself, his spiritual radiance and the almost telepathic communication which he developed with the poet who, for his part, showed what we might call a mystical receptivity to the holy man's message. Consider the following words from Neihardt:

> A strange thing happened often while I was talking with Black Elk. Over and over he seemed to be quoting from my poems. Sometimes I quoted my stuff to him, which when translated into Sioux could not retain much of its literary character, but the old man immediately recognized the ideas as his own. There was very often an uncanny *merging of consciousness* between the old fellow and myself, and I felt it and remembered it.[47]

Neihardt claimed that *Black Elk Speaks* would be 'the first absolutely Indian book thus far written. It is all out of the Indian consciousness.'[48] If we take his words about a 'merging of consciousness' seriously – and why should we not? – this contention is not to be so easily scoffed at by clever fellows in academia. As Raymond DeMallie has noted, often 'critics [have] missed the real dynamic of the book, the electric energy of the meeting of two like minds from two different cultures.'[49] Nor should we be too hasty in dismissing Neihardt's claim about the familiar passages at the beginning and end of the book which were his own poetic creations but which, he said, were 'what [Black Elk] would have said if he had been able.'[50] As Sally McCluskey has so nicely put it, 'Neihardt listened to Black Elk's story with a poet's ear, and he retold it with a poet's gifts. *Black Elk Speaks*, and Neihardt, under "religious obligation", gave that speech to the white world; but his own voice, giving form and beauty to that utterance, is softly audible behind every word.'[51] Similarly Ruth Heflin: *'Black Elk Speaks* is a collage… not only of a polyphony of Indian voices telling their stories with a sometimes indirect, sometimes overt Euro-American voice chiming in, but also of (at least) two individual souls interpreting the symbols of two seemingly different perceptions of the world that are often remarkably similar.'[52] These observations from McCluskey and Heflin strike a judicious balance between the early reception of the book in which Neihardt's contribution was more or less invisible and

the more recent deconstructive fixation with Neihardt's distortions, both real and putative.

Whatever Neihardt's shortcomings, we cannot doubt that his role in creating *Black Elk Speaks* was providentially appointed. Nor can it be denied that this book has played a decisive role in the preservation and dissemination of an imperilled Lakota esoterism from which the modern world may yet learn much. Raymond DeMallie reminds us that

> If Neihardt had never been interested in the Lakotas, and, particularly, if he had never talked with Black Elk . . . our knowledge of the old Lakota way of life would be much poorer. We would know far less about the Lakota concept of the sacred, of visions and of the powers that rule their universe. Through his work we have an invaluable perspective, an empathetic one, based on his particular life experiences and his readiness and ability to explore the domain of the 'other world' . . . We honor him as he honored his aged Lakota teachers; together, the wisdom and beauty of their words have left our world greener and more fruitful.[53]

This is well said. But it doesn't go far enough: without John Neihardt we would not have had intimate access to one of the most extraordinary visionaries of our era and would be without one of the most luminous mystical documents of the twentieth century.

Principal Sources

The standard edition of Black Elk's testimony as rendered by the poet is John G. Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks: The Complete Edition,* introduced by Philip J. Deloria, annotated by Raymond J. DeMallie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2014). The full transcript of Black Elk's long narration can be found in Raymond DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1984). For a wealth of scholarly material on both Neihardt and Black Elk see Clyde Holler (ed.), *The Black Elk Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2000), and my own *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary: The Lakota Holy Man and Sioux Tradition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2018). On Neihardt see Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1995); Vine Deloria Jr. (ed.). *Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2005); and Sally McCluskey, 'Black Elk Speaks: And So Does John Neihardt', *Western American Literature*, 6:4, Winter 1972, 231-242. One of the most interesting commentaries on Black Elk and Neihardt can be found in a book which is too little known: Elémire Zolla, *The Writer and the Shaman: A Morphology of the American Indian* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

1 See C.J. Jung, 'Mysterium Coniunctionis' in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 14: Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Princeton University Press, 1963, 206n.
2 Published in German as *Ich rufe mein Volk* (I Call my People).
3 R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk', Appendix 6 in *Black Elk Speaks: the Complete Edition* (hereafter *BES*), University of Nebraska, 2014, 242.
4 D. Stover, 'A Postcolonial Reading of Black Elk', in *The Black Elk Reader* (hereafter *BER*), ed. Clyde Holler, Syracuse University, 2000, 127.
5 Vine Deloria Jr, Introduction to *Black Elk Speaks* (1979 edition), xiii.
6 Vine Deloria Jr, Introduction to V. Deloria (ed.), *Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*, University of Nebraska, 2005,3.
7 See P. Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, Viking Press, 1983, xxxvii. It should be noted that Lame Deer was perhaps reacting against the elevation of one medicine man above others, a practice deplored by many Indians. See W.K. Powers, *Beyond the Vision*, Oklahoma University, 1987, 164. Lame Deer (1903-1976), like Wallace Black Elk (1921-2004, no relation) and the activist Russell Means (1939-2012), belonged to a later generation of Lakota who were bent on disassociating their tradition from Christian influences. *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* appeared in 1972 and Wallace Black Elk's *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota* in 1990. The latter's misleading title may well have been a marketing ploy. Nicholas Black Elk's daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, amongst others, was at some pains to divorce Wallace Black Elk from any connection with her father. See M. Steltenkamp, 'A Retrospective on *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala', BER,* 112-113.
8 W.K. Powers, 'When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens', in *Religion in Native North America*, ed. Christopher Vesey, 149.
9 W.K. Powers, 'When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens', 148.
10 B. Holloway*, Interpreting the Legacy: John Neihardt and 'Black Elk Speaks'*, University of Colorado, 2003, 31.
11 B. Holloway, *Interpreting the Legacy*, 7.
12 Recounted in his book *The River and I*. See also H. Stauffer, 'Neihardt's Journey on the Missouri' in *Sender of Words*.
13 On the recognition of Neihardt's literary work and the many awards and distinctions he received, see A.N. Petri, 'John G. Neihardt beyond Black Elk', *BER*, 278-279. (Alexis Petri is Neihardt's great-granddaughter.)
14 *A Cycle of the West* incorporated some of his earlier works. For some brief commentary on *Where the Tree Flowered* see R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy', in *Sender of Words*, 131-134, and 'John G. Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk', *BER*, 247-248.
15 See J. Neihardt, 'The Book That Would Not Die', *Western American Literature*, 6:4, 1972, 227, and S. McCluskey, *'Black Elk Speaks*; and So Does John Neihardt', *Western American Literature*, 6:4, 1972, 235.
16 H. Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, University of Nebraska, 1995, 38.

17 Hinman was a journalist planning to write a book on Crazy Horse, a project eventually taken up by her friend Mari Sandoz whose *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*, dedicated to Hinman, was published in 1942.
18 *BES* , xxiv (italics mine).
19 R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy', 116.
20 See R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk', 245. See also Joe Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*, Farrar, Strauus & Giroux, 2016, 406, and B. Holloway, *Interpreting the Legacy*, 57.
21 R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy', 124.
22 L. Utecht, 'Neihardt and Black Elk', *BES*, 284, 285.
23 Neihardt, Letter to Julius T. House, August 10, 1930, cited in Raymond DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather,* University of Nebraska, 1984, 27. Several scholars have argued that the fact that Black Elk said he was 'expecting' Neihardt does not signify any supra-normal powers on his part, nor confer any special status on Neihardt; rather, this was a ritualized form of greeting. See C. Holler, 'Lakota Religion and Tragedy', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LII:I, 1984, 22.
24 Black Elk quoted in G. Linden, 'John Neihardt and *Black Elk Speaks*', *BER*, 85.
25 F. Waters, 'Neihardt and the Vision of Black Elk', in *Sender of Words*, 13. I quote this passage not because I concur with Waters' spiritual evolutionism – on the contrary! –but because it introduces an idea to be explored later: that Neihardt, in his role as the mediator between Black Elk and the world of the whites, was an instrument of a power of which he himself may well have been unaware.
26 Black Elk's daughter, Lucy, was upset by the choice of Ben as the translator of her father's words; she had expected this role to be taken by Black Elk's fellow-catechist, Emil Afraid of Hawk. Lucy, herself brought up exclusively as Catholic, believed that Afraid of Hawk would pay more respect to her father's Catholicism. Ben's role, sanctioned by his father, apparently caused some tension within the family. See Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*, 413.
27 Standing Bear, four years older than Black Elk, had experienced many of the same key events and had also converted to Catholicism, taking the name of the first Christian martyr. While touring Europe with Cody's Wild West Show he had been seriously injured. In hospital he fell in love with and later married an Austrian nurse. They returned to Pine Ridge where she was known as 'Across the Eastern Water Woman', See Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*, 410-411.
28 C. Eastman, *The Soul of the Indian*, New York: Dover, 2003 (reprint of 1911 edition); unpaginated; the passage quoted is from the second page of the main text.
29 Raymond DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather,* 28.
30 Ibid, 31.
31 H. Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 52.
32 Ibid, 53.
33 B. Holloway, *Interpreting the Legacy*, 17.
34 See G. Linden, 'John Neihardt and *Black Elk Speaks*', 79.

[35] The interviews which form the basis of *Black Elk Speaks* occurred between May 10 and May 28, 1931.
[36] Harney Peak was officially renamed Black Elk Peak in August, 2016.
[37] *BES*, 171-172.
[38] Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*, 430.
[39] S. McCluskey, *'Black Elk Speaks*; and So Does John Neihardt', 238-9.
[40] John G. Neihardt, 'The Book that Would Not Die', 229 (italics mine).
[41] B. Holloway, *Interpreting the Legacy*, 3.
[42] From the Foreword to the 1979 edition of *Black Elk Speaks*, xiv. Clyde Holler has outlined the reasons why he finds Deloria's attitude unsatisfactory; see 'Lakota Religion and Tragedy', 40-41.
[43] Frithof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*, World Wisdom, 1990, 77.
[44] E. Zolla, *The Writer and the Shaman*, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovic, 264.
[45] Ibid, 271.
[46] M. McAllister, 'Native Sources: American Indian Autobiography', *Western American Literature*, 32, 1997,15.
[47] H. Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 77 (italics mine). A slightly different rendition of this passage can be found in *The Sixth Grandfather*, 40-41.
[48] H. Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 68.
[49] R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy', 111.
[50] S. McCluskey, *'Black Elk Speaks*: and So Does John Neihardt', 238.
[51] Ibid, 241.
[52] R. Heflin, *'I Remain Alive': The Sioux Literary Renaissance*, Syracuse University, 2000, 161.
[53] R. DeMallie, 'John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy', 133.

Bill Harney

1895-1962

life among the Aborigines

I can hardly wait for the day when I can get back to the Territory and become human again.
[Harney during a visit to Sydney, 1947][1]

Our man was known throughout the northern outback as 'Bilarni', a moniker which signalled his place amongst the indigenous people with whom he spent much of his life. He was one of a burgeoning group of mid-20thC bushmen and itinerant writers/journalists who brought outback Australia, its people and history, to the attention of the wider public, most of whom lived on the south-eastern coastline of the sparsely populated continent. One may mention such names as Ion Idriess, CP Mountford, Douglas Lockwood, Frank Clune, Patsy Adam-Smith, Colin Simpson, George Farwell and Ernestine Hill, several of whom knew 'Bilarni' personally. Through his writings and radio broadcasts Bill Harney became widely known as a spinner of bush yarns, a raconteur with an engaging and distinctively Australian style somewhat in the lineage of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Steele Rudd and their ilk. Along with his friend the painter Albert Namatjira, Harney became perhaps the best-known Territorian of his generation. My own interest in Harney lies in his experience of living among people whose ancestors had peopled this 'sunburnt land'

since time immemorial. This is how the *Coolgardie Miner* described Harney in 1947:

> To Sydney recently came the tough, nuggety bushman, philosopher and novelist Bill Harney for a breather from the jungle pads of Arnhem Land. Up north there was probably no other white man who understood aboriginal law and legend as well as he did, who had lived among them as long, eating their nardoo and witchety grubs. Harney is a Territory 'old-timer' who has hunted wild buffalo, worked as a drover, with camel teams, on cattle stations, and on luggers for more than 30 years. Harney went bush when he left his Charters Towers home, aged 9 years, and has spent most of his life in it.[2]

William Edward Harney was born the second of three children in Charters Towers, in northern Queensland, in 1895.[3] He spent the first ten years of his life there. His parents were both English-born but by now Harney's father had the whiff of Australian gold-dust in his nostrils, lured hither and thither in search of 'the yellow metal that makes white man crazy'.[4] For several years he was as far away as the Kalgoorlie goldfields on the other side of the continent. In 1905 Harney's father moved the family to Cairns where the boy found work as a printer's devil on the local rag. His mother worked as a boarding house cook, other members of the family on outback cattle stations, while the father continued with his fossicking. The father's dream of a golden jackpot remained unrealized. He was eventually to die from 'the Miner's Complaint', quartz dust on the lungs. As Harney later remarked, 'Gold-prospecting is a form of curse: let the madness of "chasing the weight" take over, and its victim is ever on the run'.[5]

In 1907 twelve-year old Bill headed out into the 'back of the beyond' to work as a billy-boy, stockman, drover and boundary-rider in the remote west of the state. His employment was intermittent and precarious, and in 1915 – that year mythologized in the Anzac legend – he enlisted in the AIF (Australian Imperial Force). He trained in Egypt and served on the Western Front in the years of unimaginable slaughter, 1916-1918. He was a signaller in the 9th and 25th Battalions. Like so many others, Harney was traumatized by his war experience and for many years was extremely reticent about it. As he later recounted 'I'd never crack on that I'd been to the war. I was somehow or another ashamed of the war'.[6]

Returning from the trenches, broke as well as disillusioned, Harney again headed west, first by train and then on horseback, later recalling that he 'rode 800 miles on a horse to Borroloola to forget about it [the war]'.[7] In the Northern Territory he again worked as a drover and boundary rider, this time adding a stint as a mailman. It was in these early post-war years that Harney 'crossed the line', choosing to live with his Aboriginal friends in the Australian bush, later writing that 'In me was born a passionate love for the Australian bush which will burn until the end, a love stronger than love of family, so strong that even now it threatens to claim me.'[8]

1921 brought a windfall of £620, won on the Melbourne Cup. For the first time Harney had a substantial sum in his hard-worked hands. He leased Seven Emus Station in the Gulf of Carpentaria country and worked with the local Aborigines, mustering wild herds, buying and selling cattle. But alas, he was soon caught with two thousand head of cattle stolen from another station, was imprisoned in Borroloola jail but released, without conviction, after six months. Extraordinary thing: the Borroloola Jail had a well-furnished stock of books, apparently pillaged from the remnants of the burnt-out town library and including many of the classics of antiquity and of English literature. Harney later claimed that he taught himself to read during his six months of incarceration – but perhaps this was bordering on the tall-tale, a genre in which he was master! Elsewhere he tells us that he learned to read and write by studying the labels on food cans.

Released from jail Harney surrendered his lease on the station, purchased a sailing vessel and went to work as a trepanger on the northern coastlines. With his friend Horace Foster and the local Yanyuwa people, they fished for sea cucumber (*bêche-de-mer* in French). The Aboriginal folk had been trading these marine invertebrates with the Macassans, from the Sulawesi region of Indonesia, for several centuries, well before the earliest European settlement of Australia.

One of Harney's stop-overs in these years was Groote Eylandt ('Large Island') in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 1927, in the Chapel of the Anglican Mission, he married Linda Beattie, a seventeen-year-old Warramungu woman. Daughter Beatrice ('Beattie') was born in the following year and son Billy two years later. Family life was not always smooth sailing. During the Depression years Harney and his family roamed far and wide in search of work, suffering many hardships. His labours in this period included road-mending, fencing

and maintaining an aerodrome on Bathurst Island. Many of his European acquaintances could not forgive him for 'marrying into colour'. Linda contracted TB in 1930, prompting Harney to sell his sailing vessel, *Iolanthe*, and move inland to a less humid climate but his wife only survived another two years. Some of her family blamed Harney for her death, reproaching him for 'taking her out of country'. Soon after, daughter Beattie also fell ill with TB, and died in 1934. Billy perished as a youth in 1945, drowning while trying to rescue a child. Harney dedicated *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines* 'To Linda at Katherine, To Beattie at Darwin, To Billy at Alice Springs'.

After Linda's death Harney formed a relationship with Ludi Libuluyma, a Wardaman woman with whom he had a son, Bill Yidumduma Harney, later to achieve some fame as an artist, storyteller, writer, musician, and expert on Wardaman cosmology.[9] He narrowly escaped the fate of the Stolen Generations, and was brought up in a traditional Aboriginal community by an adoptive father. Little mention of this son is made in Harney's own writings or in accounts of his life; one may surmise that the relationship was little more than biological but the son clearly inherited some of Bill Harney's many talents.

Between 1940 and 1947 Harney worked for the Australian government's Native Affairs Branch as a patrol officer and Protector of Aborigines. He resigned from these positions in 1948 and built a beach hut on Two Feller Creek, near Darwin. He resided there for some years, living off the land and the sea, and devoted himself to his writings. Over the next decade he travelled widely throughout northern Australia and engaged in various kinds of work including road repairs, working as a tour guide for the TAA airline, a consultant on the film *Jedda* (1955), and advisor to various geographical expeditions. He had by this time been recognized as an authority on the myths, customs, rituals and languages of the indigenous peoples. In 1956 he visited Britain where he gave talks and interviews on radio and television. The following year brought more popular acclaim in the wake of a wildly popular broadcast done with veteran ABC radio-man John Thompson.

In 1957 Harney was appointed as 'the Keeper of the Rock', the Ranger of Ayers Rock-Mt Olga National Park where, in his everyday contacts with tourists, he was able to make good use of his immense store of accumulated knowledge about the land and its people. At the time of his appointment, Ayers Rock (now 'Uluru') was visited by

about sixty tourists annually. By the time of his resignation five years later the number had grown to four thousand. (Today the number is about 250,000.) One of his last books was *To Ayers Rock and Beyond* (1963), of which the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer said,

> Serious travellers visiting the great monolith could have no better guide book, and for the truly adventurous, Harney's account of his journeyings westward into the lost and lonely lands haunted by half-wild tribesmen is immensely exciting.[10]

Harney retired in 1962 and died the following year in his home at Mooloolaba, on the Sunshine Coast in south-eastern Queensland.

One scholar describes Harney this way:

> Although Harney had received little formal education, he taught himself and built up an exceptional knowledge. He communicated easily with the Aborigines and became an authority on their lore, customs, rites and languages. A gregarious and generous person who regarded everyone as equal, he was short and stocky, with hypnotic blue eyes and an expressive face. Above all, he was a superb raconteur.

In the early 40s Harney took up writing in a serious way and produced many articles for the illustrated weekly *Walkabout* and magazines/journals such as *The Bulletin* and *Overland.* His first published book was *Taboo* (1943), a selection of stories introduced by the eminent anthropologist, AP Elkin, with whom Harney worked on several projects. Elkin commended Harney's 'sympathetic and intelligent interest' in the Aborigines. *Taboo* was followed by nine other books, the most significant being *Songs of the Songmen* (1949) (another collaboration with Elkin), *Life Among the Aborigines* (1957), and the autobiographical *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines* (1961), a book which deserves a more honoured position in the library of books about European-Aboriginal interactions written from the white side. *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines* sits alongside such distinguished but still neglected books as TGH Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Creek*, Daryl Tonkin's *Jackson's Track*, and *Two Men Dreaming* by James Cowan, to mention only a few of the more distinguished works in this sub-genre. (In recent decades there has been an over-due wave of such books

from Aboriginal writers, one of the first being Sally Morgan's *My Place*, 1987.)

Harney's friend Douglas Lockwood, himself a prolific writer on the Australian outback, finished *The Shady Tree* (1963) after Harney's death, and with his wife Ruth edited two posthumous compilations of Harney's autobiographical recollections, *Bill Harney's War* (1983), based on the 1958 interview with John Thompson, and *A Bushman's Life* (1990). In collaboration with Thompson's wife, Patricia, Harney also produced *Bill Harney's Cookbook* (1960). His books, full of bush yarns and colourful anecdotes salted with a peculiarly Australian brand of humour, sold well.

Introducing *Taboo* in 1943, Elkin observed that

> almost every story in this book is a concrete illustration of the change wrought in the natives' manner of life by contact with the white man and his ways, and of the disastrous consequences.[11]

Those 'disastrous consequences' were everywhere evident in Harney's writings: the violent seizure of land and waterways, the sexual exploitation and abuse of Aboriginal women, poisoned flour, murders committed with impunity, the subversion of traditional laws and customs by the imposition of alien legal forms and modes, and many other abuses and villainies. Harney was not a political crusader or a moral reformer but these injustices were woven into his narratives and thus exposed to his white readers. This, in and by itself, was a noble service. But what are we to make of Harney's efforts to understand Aboriginal people and to educate the rest of Australia about their culture?

The first thing to be said, whatever shortcomings we now discern in Harney's writings, is this: in choosing to live much of his life with indigenous people, to marry an Aboriginal woman and raise a family with her, to treat his many Aboriginal friends as equal, to recognize their inherent dignity as human beings, to discern something precious in their cultural heritage, and to do whatever he could to remedy the many and often appalling injustices to which they were subjected, he was swimming against a very strong tide. Racism, in its many guises (some ostensibly benign), was pervasive and rampant throughout Australia but the far north, Harney's home turf, was the country's 'Deep South', the region in which racism was most conspicuous and vicious. It was not until 1967 that the continent's

original inhabitants were recognized as Australian citizens. Sadly, Harney didn't live to see that day. However, as recent history and contemporary events all too painfully demonstrate, the country is still wrestling with endemic racism, more than half a century after Harney's death. Harney, straddling the racial divide, was subjected to acrimonious criticism from both sides – but, it must be said, the most venomous came from the white side.

It was inevitable that Harney's writings on Aboriginal-related subjects, like those of his contemporaries, should now be seen as stained with some of the less overt, more subtle but widespread forms of racism in mid-20th century. One might adduce the 'dying race' theme which affected even the most distinguished, perceptive, and sympathetic of Harney's contemporaries who engaged with Aboriginal/racial issues: one might mention anthropologists such as Elkin and TGH Strehlow, writers like Xavier Herbert and Katherine Susannah Prichard, politicians such as Paul Hasluck, or journalists and travel writers like Douglas Lockwood. What is noteworthy in Harney's life and work (as too in that of most of the individuals just mentioned) is not that it is sometimes tinged with racist ideas – how could it not be? – but that he was so courageous and so steadfast in his allegiance to the task of promoting and protecting the welfare of the continent's First Nations peoples. Harney played a modest but significant and honourable part in the slow and on-going dismantlement of racism in Australia. For that, at the least, he deserves our respect and gratitude.

Principal Sources

On Harney's life see W.E. (Bill) Harney, *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines* (London: Robert Hale, 1961), *Ayers Rock and Beyond* (Bayswater: Ian Drakeman Publishing, 1963) and *A Bushman's life: an autobiography*, ed. Douglas and Ruth Lockwood (Ringwood: Viking O'Neil, 1990). See also Jennifer J. Kennedy, 'Harney, William Edward (Bill) (1895-1962), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 14, 1996, and "William Edward Harney", in *Wikipedia*. Biographical sketches and other fragmentary information may can be found at several sites online.

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1 *Coolgardie Miner*, 10 October, 1947; outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/bill-harney.

2 Ibid. (Other more reliable sources indicate that Harney left home at the age of 12, not 9.)

3 The biographical information which follows is taken from the sources listed at the end of this essay, particularly from Harney's own *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines* (1961), and the accounts by Jennifer Kennedy and in the *Wikipedia* entry.

4 The phrase comes from the Lakota visionary Nicholas Black Elk, referring to the 1870s goldrush in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

5 *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines*, 1961, 173.

6 vwma.org.au/explore/people/134059.

7 Ibid.

8 *Coolgardie Miner*, 10 October, 1947.

9 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Yidumduma_Harney.

10 Back cover blurb on *To Ayers Rock and Beyond*, 1963 edition.

11 Quoted in 'Wadhalloway', *Taboo*, W.E. Harney; theaustralianlegend.wordpress.com/2017/12/08/taboo-harney/

Willa Cather

1873-1947

'the shining, elusive element'

What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself – life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?[1]

Willa Cather's life, work and reputation are intimately related to Nebraska, a state, Sinclair Lewis said, which was first 'made available' to the rest of the world by the novelist. Yet Cather only lived there for fourteen of her seventy-three years. Her first nine years were spent in rural Virginia where her family had farmed the land for six generations. After her education in Nebraska, Cather moved to Pittsburgh where she worked for ten years as a journalist and teacher before she settled in New York, her home for the last forty years of his life. By the time she moved to Manhattan she had found her vocation as a novelist, attracted some literary acclaim and attained financial security. Thereafter she travelled extensively both in the American West, in New England and Canada, and in Europe (England, France and Italy), often staying in various places for months at a time, acquiring an affectionate familiarity with them and drawing on these experiences in her fiction. After moving to New York she lived with Edith Lewis, editor, dear friend, probable lover, her literary executor and the author of *Willa Cather Living*, a charming memoir on which I have drawn heavily in what follows. In later life they acquired land

on Grand Manan, an island in the Bay of Fundy (New Brunswick) where they built a modest summer refuge, the only property Cather ever owned. In her last years Cather suffered from severe arthritis which inhibited her writing and typing, and from breast cancer. She died in 1943 of a cerebral haemorrhage, and was buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a place in which she had enjoyed annual sojourns. The inscription on her tombstone reads 'That is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great.'

Cather's personality was shaped by 'a warm, eager, spontaneous interest in people', and by her 'natural ardour and high spirits'. She had a 'frank, radiantly out-going nature' that charmed almost everyone who met her. But there was also a veiled 'strain of melancholy', stemming perhaps from her keen sense of the sorrows and perplexities which attend most lives.[2] From her study of Katherine Mansfield:

> One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them. In those simple relationships of loving husband and wife, affectionate sisters, children and grandmother, there are innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish which make up the pattern of our lives day by day, though they are not down in the list of subjects from which the conventional novelist works.[3]

It was just these 'innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish' which are foregrounded in Cather's own work. She also observed in a letter that 'things have always hit me very hard. I suppose that is why I never run out of material to write about. The inside of me is full of dents and scars'.[4] Cather was 'naturally a fearless person, fearless in matters of thought, of social convention; people never intimidated her; and she was extremely self-possessed in the presence of physical danger'.[5] Among her many other fine qualities were her generosity of spirit, her stoicism in times of hardship and suffering, her steadfast commitment to her art, her moral integrity. The worst 'criticisms' that I've been able to uncover were that she could be 'flinty' and 'histrionic' and, with her closest friends could occasionally lapse into the role of 'drama queen' – not a very damaging arraignment really!

She had a great love of learning, was an omnivorous reader and had a deep love for art, the theatre and for classical and operatic music.

'the whole of herself was in her look,
in that transparently clear, level, unshrinking gaze'[6]

After leaving Nebraska Cather moved in a rich cosmopolitan milieu, forming friendships with many distinguished writers, musicians, actors, artists, clerics, publishers and intellectuals. Pittsburgh, she later wrote, 'was even more vital, more creative, more hungry for culture than New York. Pittsburgh was the birthplace of my writing.' Her many friends included Alfred Knopf, Yehudi Menuhin, DH Lawrence, Sarah Orne Jewett and Robert Frost as well as any number of figures well-known at the time but now somewhat faded or forgotten. After a plethora of ephemeral reviews, essays, and columns for *McClure's Magazine* her creative energies were largely devoted to short stories (published in five collections) and novels. She was also an inveterate letter-writer. Although a warm and open personality she closely guarded her private life; before her death she destroyed some of her more intimate writings and in her will forbade the publication of any of her letters, of which, nonetheless, more than three thousand survived. Her prohibition was respected for seventy years until the appearance of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* (2013).

In 1923 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, ironically for *One of Our Ours* which has since attracted more critical flak than any other of her novels apart from the apprentice-work, *Alexander's Bridge,* about which Cather herself was unduly dismissive. Once into her stride she seemed incapable of producing anything shoddy or second-rate. Her most popular works are the 'prairie trilogy' (*O Pioneers!, My Ántonia* and *Song of the Lark*) while *The Lost Lady* and

Death Comes for the Archbishop are perhaps the most critically acclaimed. Her many literary enthusiasms and influences included the Bible, Virgil, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, Tolstoy, Henry James, Edith Wharton and Katherine Mansfield (a writer with whom Cather had many obvious affinities though one is a writer of a major order, the other minor). Amongst those who lauded her work during her lifetime were HL Mencken, Thomas Hardy (particularly gratifying as she was a great admirer of his work), Alfred Kazin, Rebecca West and Wallace Stevens, the poet being one of the earliest to recognize the subtle artistry at work in Cather's deceptively 'simple' narratives. Her fiction fell into comparative neglect in the decades following her death but the last thirty years have witnessed a burgeoning critical and biographical literature, all too much of it of an impertinent psychologistic bent and/or fuelled by a tendentious political agenda which projects her as a poster-girl for LGBTI, a role she would have found quite repugnant. With an eye on Cather's recent recruitment by ideologues of various stripe, Roberta Silman has wryly observed that 'her resurrection was almost as bad as her neglect'.[7]

Why am I writing about Willa Cather? Because she is my *favourite* 20th century author. Is she also the 'best' novelist of the century? Well, certainly a contender though if I had to choose at gunpoint I would probably nominate Thomas Mann – a writer of a very different kind but one Cather greatly admired – but there's not much in it. The editors of her correspondence declare that

> Cather's novels and stories are among the finest writings of the twentieth century, rich and complex in their meaning-making, yet elegant and pristine on their surfaces. She manages both to enchant readers with her prose and to move them with her insights into human experience.[8]

Yes, quite so! Consulting a record of my own reading history, documented since my early university days, I find that I have read Cather's twelve novels more than thirty times – on average, nearly three times each. No other 20thC novelist can rival these numbers apart from Graham Greene. While I have the deepest respect and admiration for Greene's *oeuvre*, I don't *love* it in quite the same way. Likewise with Mann. So, the question here is how to explain Cather's appeal?

Cather's themes are universal: the euphoric promise and vitality of youth, the taming of a 'new' land, exile, the role of the artist, the pathos of lives barely lived, the joys and sorrows of love, the tribulations of old age, the mysteries of the Spirit, the 'call of the Infinite', to name a few of the more conspicuous. But her treatment of such themes is always deeply rooted in a particular place and time. Her fiction is pervaded with a vital and immediate *sense of place,* almost always arising out of her own direct experience, mediated by memory. (The workings of memory figure prominently in the narratives but also inform her literary craft.) Nearly all of her fiction has autobiographical wellsprings, not in the sense that she was obsessed with herself – there was nothing of the egoist or narcissist in her make-up – but rather that she is transmuting her own experience of this location, these people, this history. Her novels can all be directly mapped over those places where Cather lived or spent extended periods. The sense of place evoked by the novels relates not only to the visible physical environment, both natural and man-made, but to the rhythms of the natural world, to social patterns and to all those complex inter-relations of ordinary people – with each other, with the land and the seasons, with the past. In many of her novels, as AS Byatt has noted, Cather achieves a 'formal coherence' by transforming 'the time of memory, the time of one human life, the time of the seasons and the land, and the nature of death into a slow, retrospective meditation'.[9]

In Cather's fictional world this sense of place is most fully realized in three locales: the prairies and high plains of Nebraska, the mountains, deserts and canyonlands of New Mexico and Colorado, and 17thC Quebec. Her first nine novels are all located somewhere in the American West, most often in Nebraska, *Shadows on the Rock* in Quebec, and the last two, *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* largely in Chicago and in the Old South respectively. Although Cather spent a good deal of time in Europe, especially in France, only two of her novels, *One of Our Own* and *Shadows on the Rock*, venture beyond America.

Here is Edith Lewis describing Cather's relationship to the Nebraska of the late 19th century:

> In the first part of *My Ántonia* she has recorded her own experiences of the land and the people, and there is a warmth and freshness and triumphant happiness in that

> book which springs directly from her own youthful feelings of the time; the joyous awakening to a new and beautiful country and a thrilling new kind of life. She gave herself with passion to the country and to the people, the struggling foreigners who inhabited it; became at heart their champion, made their struggle her own – their fight to master the soil, to hold the land in the faces of drouths and blizzards, hailstorms and prairie fires.[10]

Cather's identification is not only with the people but with the land itself, with its whole ecology. She was no doubt mirroring her own experience when she wrote of Alexandra, the heroine of *O Pioneers!*,

> She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun.

Edith Lewis, describing their visit to Mesa Verde, recalled Cather's extraordinary sensitivity to the landscape: 'She was intensely alive to the country – as a musician might be alive to an orchestral composition he was hearing for the first time'.[11]

One of the most striking features of Cather's fiction is her re-creation of the unembellished lives of ordinary, unremarkable, humble people going about their daily business. She recalled her own youthful encounters with the Swedish, Norwegian and Bohemian settlers in Nebraska, especially the women:

> I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt *as if they had told me much more than they said* – as if I had actually got inside another person's skin.[12]

As Lewis acutely observes, 'Certainly the people of Red Cloud were not more interesting than those of any other small American town. But she was more interested in them. Perhaps she was more interested in them even than they themselves were.'[13] In a letter to

her brother Roscoe, Cather wrote, 'As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places – cared too hard. It made me, as a writer.'[14]

Writing of the origins of *My Ántonia*, perhaps the most loved of her novels, Cather stated that the story was inspired by 'the Bohemian hired girl of one of our neighbours… She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyments, in her love of people, in her willingness to take pains'. Interesting that Cather should identify these modest but very human qualities as the very hallmarks of the 'true artist'. Imagining a book based on this domestic servant, Cather remarked that

> there was enough material in that book for a lurid melodrama… However, I thought my Ántonia deserved something better than the *Saturday Evening Post* sort of stuff… *My Ántonia*… is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin the material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it in the way I thought absolutely true.[15]

Not everyone was happy with the results. Mrs Fields, a Boston socialite who encouraged Cather's early writing career, wasn't the only one to deplore *My Ántonia* because it was about 'hired girls'. (This reminds me of François Truffaut's horrid remark when asked why he walked out of a screening of Satyajit Ray's sublime *Pather Panchali*: he had no wish, he said, to see Indian peasants eating with their hands. Both pompous and ignorant!) *The New York Herald* critic regretted that 'a writer of such fine literary quality' should concern herself with 'those dreary channels that traverse life on the Western prairies like so many irrigation ditches'. On the other hand, the novel attracted the praise of many contemporary writers and critics. Scott Fitzgerald counted his own *The Great Gatsby* a failure next to *My Ántonia*. Mencken opined that *My Ántonia* was not only Cather's finest novel but 'one of the best any American has ever done' and that 'no romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful as *My Ántonia*'.[16] He wasn't wrong.

We can find several clues to Cather's method as a novelist in the passages cited in the preceding two paragraphs. Her phrase 'they had told me much more than they said' precisely indicates the effect of the novel which, on the surface, might appear quite simple, direct,

even naïve, but which, on closer investigation, turns out to be multivalent, complex and deeply poetic despite the fact that the novelist insisted on portraying only 'the little everyday happenings and occurrences' in her protagonist's life.

Photographers talk of 'negative space' in their compositions, a part of the image which is apparently empty but which is significant in rendering its effect. There is a good deal of 'negative space' in Cather's fiction, deriving from a more or less invisible artistry which pares away everything superfluous. Not for Cather the 'realist' procedure of a prodigious and often tedious accumulation of detail to give the story some sort of ostensible 'verisimilitude'. As she herself tersely remarked 'Too much detail is apt, like any other form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar; and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call "composition".'[17] She found much of the fiction of her contemporaries 'over-furnished'. In her essay on her friend Sara Orne Jewett, with whom she shared many creative proclivities, Cather declared that 'The higher processes are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a higher and truer effect.'[18] In a late compilation of some of her critical writings, *Not Under Forty*, Willa Cather explicitly referred to a quality of literary art which I have signalled by the term 'negative space' and which she herself, among modern novelists, had mastered to an almost unparalleled degree:

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there – that, one might say, is created. It is *the inexplicable presence of the thing not named*, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.[19]

Elsewhere she restates the idea in slightly different terms:

> Art, it seems to me, should simplify finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole – so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page.[20]

During her years at *McClure's Magazine* Cather wrote both theatrical and musical reviews. Plays and concerts often feature in her fiction, centrally so in *Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*. But music is not only a narrative element in the fiction but a shaping influence on structure and style, sharply perceived by Lewis:

> Music, for Willa Cather, was hardly at all, I think, an intellectual interest. It was an emotional experience that had a potent influence on her own imaginative processes – quickening the flow of ideas, suggesting new forms and associations, translating itself into parallel movements of thought and feeling. I think no critic has sufficiently emphasized, or possibly recognized, how much musical forms influenced her composition, and how her style, her beauty of cadence and rhythm, were the result of a sort of transposed musical feeling, and were arrived at almost unconsciously, instead of being a conscious effort to produce definite effects with words.[21]

In an arresting phrase Cather referred to imaginative art as 'a *composition* of sympathy and observation' which is to say that the author's sensibility is inextricable from their work. Of the creative artist she said, 'If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And *this gift of sympathy is his great gift*; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine.'[22] From her essay on Mansfield: 'These secret accords and antipathies which lie hidden under our everyday behavior … more than any outward events make our lives happy or unhappy.' Cather's sensitivity to these 'secret accords and antipathies' is a large part of the extraordinary 'gift of sympathy' informing her fiction.

Something must be said about two of Cather's late novels, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, both among her very best but standing a little apart from her earlier work. They exhibit a deepening concern with matters of the spirit. She was herself confirmed, in middle age, in the Episcopal Church but already had a long-standing interest in Roman Catholicism, especially in its medieval French form. Her visits to New Mexico and later to Quebec deepened her interest in the 'civilizing influence' of French Catholicism in the New World. Her sympathetic receptivity to religious sensibilities was earlier signalled by such formulations as these: 'Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin.

Economics and art are strangers';[23] 'Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had';[24] 'There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that's my creed and I'll follow it to the end'.[25] These two late novels were less firmly anchored in Cather's own direct experience and in both cases she researched the subject matter assiduously. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* germinated in her friendship with a Belgian priest, Father Haltermann, who told her much about both the Native Americans of the Southwest and the Catholic missionaries in 19thC New Mexico, while a visit to Quebec triggered the extended researches which came to fruition in *Shadows on the Rock*. The former novel is based on the life of Archbishop Lamy, the first bishop of New Mexico. Cather's imagination was fired by a bronze statue of Lamy, in Santa Fe, outside the Cathedral Basilica of St Francis for whose construction he was responsible:

> …a pioneer churchman who looked so well-bred and distinguished. In his pictures one felt the same thing, something fearless and fine and very, very well-bred – something that spoke of race. What I felt curious about was the daily life of such a man in a crude frontier society.[26]

Archbishop Lamy
Basilica Cathedral of St Francis,
Santa Fe (photo H.O.)

Both are remarkable novels, radical and daring in method, almost miraculously evocative, and stunningly realized though the latter poses some challenges for readers not finely attuned to Cather's thematic purposes, her innovative narrative strategies and the muted tone of the novel. Cather's first biographer, E.K. Brown, called *Death of the Archbishop* 'the most beautiful achievement of Willa Cather's

imagination'. I wouldn't argue with that. *Shadows* is also a book of rare beauty and sweetness, partly because of Cather's achieved imaginative intimacy with a time, a place and a sensibility remote from her usual concerns.

To conclude this brief account I can do no better than recall one of Cather's own ruminations about the literary art:

> One might say that every fine story must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality which one… can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden.[27]

After reading any of Cather's novels I am left with an exquisite 'residuum of pleasure' which, indeed, cannot be defined, but which mysteriously derives from her narrative material, from the artistic alchemy with which it is shaped and expressed, and above all, from the sensibility of its creator, altogether 'individual, unique', so finely attuned to 'the shining, elusive element which is life itself'.

Principal Sources

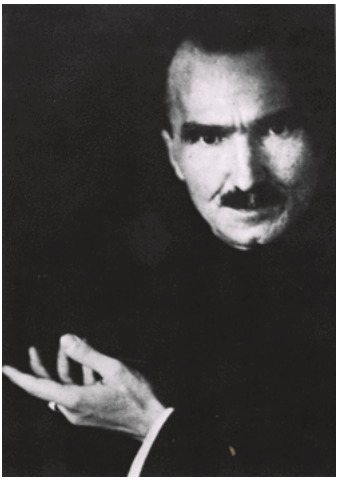
The novels, of course. (If you're only going to read two: *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*… but really they ought *all* to be read!) Edith Lewis' *Willa Cather Living* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953) is an indispensable memoir, and will tell most readers as much as they want to know about Cather's life. To delve deeper you might go to *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, New York: Knopf, 2013). *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1990) gathers together some of Cather's non-fiction. For intelligent and disinterested commentary on the fiction see A.S. Byatt's Introductions to most of the novels in the Virago Modern Series editions. For critical/ideological controversies see Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) and Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

1 From *The Song of the Lark*, 1915.
2 Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living*, 1953, xiii, xvii, 53.
3 From an essay on Katherine Mansfield, in *Not Under Forty*, quoted in Maria Popova in *themarginalian*: themarginalian.org/2016/02/25/willa-cather-relationships/.
4 *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. A. Jewell & J. Stout, 2013, xvi.
5 *Willa Cather Living*, xiv.
6 Ibid, xii.
7 Roberta Silman, 'A Consumate Artist', review of Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (2000), in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 2002 (on-line).
8 Editors' Introduction to *Selected Letters*, ix.
9 A.S. Byatt, Afterword to *O Pioneers!*, Virago Modern Classics series, 1983, 314.
10 *Willa Cather Living*, 14.
11 *Ibid,* 101.
12 *The Selected Letters*, xii (italics mine).
13 *Willa Cather Living*, 24.
14 *The Selected Letters*, xv.
15 Cather quoted in A.S. Byatt's Introduction to *My Ántonia*, 1980, ii-iii.
16 The cited judgements of *My Ántonia*, from Mrs Fields and others, can be found in *Willa Cather Living,* 107-108, the *Wikipedia* entry 'Willa Cather', and Kathleen Norris, 'Willa Cather: The Road is all' (online at pbs.org).
17 Cather quoted in A.S. Byatt's Introduction to *Song of the Lark*, Virago Modern Classics series, 1982, xiv.
18 'Miss Jewett', originally published as the Preface to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewet*t (1925).
19 From 'The Novel *Démeublé*' in *Not Under Forty,* cited in Silman's review (italics mine).
20 *Willa Cather on Writing*, 2013, 67.
21 Ibid, 47-48.
22 *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, 1990,15 (italics mine).
23 'Four Letters: Escapism' first published in *Commonweal* (17 April 1936).
24 From *The Professor's House*, 1925 (an echo of W.B. Yeats: 'poetry and religion are the same thing.').
25 From *The Professor's House*.
26 Quoted in A.S. Byatt's Introduction to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Virago Modern Classics series, 1981, ii.
27 'Miss Jewett'.

NIKOS KAZANTAZAKIS

1883-1957

'lightning and smouldering fire'



I felt deep within me that the highest point a man can attain is not Knowledge, or Virtue, or Goodness, or Victory, but something even greater, more heroic and more despairing: Sacred Awe![1]

I first encountered Kazantzakis' novels as an undergraduate and was intoxicated by their strange combination of beauty, power, and spiritual angst. I also saw, at that time, the screen adaptations of *Zorba the Greek* and *Christ Recrucified* (the film was entitled *He Who Must Die*), and read *Report to Greco,* written in Kazantzakis' last year; it greatly excited and agitated me. It attracted some rhapsodic praise, critics referring to the author's 'mystical profundity, his ornate sensualism and his extraordinary erudition', and lauding the book as 'a vast, stormy canvas shot with lightning and smouldering fire', a work of 'volcanic intensity'.[2] The English publishers sub-titled the book 'an autobiographical novel' but Kazantzakis insisted that it was not an autobiography, allowing only that it was 'a confession' – but I already knew that one can't always trust such authorial declarations; Tolstoy, after all, disowned *Anna Karenina* and Gogol *Dead Souls* while Henry James dismissed *Washington Square* as 'an unhappy

accident'. (What were they thinking!?) In any event, for a few years Kazantzakis remained one of my favourite writers… but then, for reasons quite unclear, the spell was broken. Now at the other end of my life I occasionally take down one of his novels from my shelves, the accumulated dust reproaching me with my years of neglect. I blow off the dust, nostalgically recall the vivid impression the book made, fondle it gently, return it to its place; but I feel no need to re-read it. But I *do* feel the need to revisit Kazantzakis the man, to pay him some sort of qualified homage, to discharge, so to say, my debt to him. In the long interim my interest in the Greek writer was from time to time momentarily rekindled by some of Kazantzakis' travel books and by Scorsese's powerful but ultimately unsatisfactory 1988 film version of *The Last Temptation.*[3] As far as I can figure it, it was Kazantzakis' passionate search for meaning and 'authenticity' – the catch-cry of the existentialist writers, though that label hardly fits him – that so powerfully attracted my interest and admiration, as well as a certain Promethean rebelliousness attractive to my youthful mind.

Kazantzakis was born in 1883, in Heraklion, during the Ottoman occupation of Crete, later to be annexed to Greece. After his secondary education Kazantzakis moved to Athens to study law, culminating in his doctoral thesis on Nietzsche (one of his formative influences). Thence to Paris for further studies. There he was much taken with the ideas of Henri Bergson and was also initiated into freemasonry. Kazantzakis later cited Homer, Dante and Bergson as his principal influences but his work was also coloured by his engagements, at various points, with Orthodox spirituality, Greek nationalism, communist theory, existentialism, and Buddhism.

Kazantzakis published his first novel in 1906 by which time he had embarked on a journalistic career. In 1910 he settled in Athens, married the year after and volunteered in the first Balkan War. After he befriended the poet Angelos Sikelianos they travelled together around Greece for two years, spending an extended period at Mt Athos. For a number of years Kazantzakis worked in various government posts as well as pursuing his journalistic career, travelling widely in Europe, the Middle East and the USSR. In the 1920s he divorced his wife and struck up a love affair with journalist and author Eleni (Helen) Samiou whom he finally married in 1945. In 1924 he was arrested in Crete on a charge of leading a communist organization but nothing much came of it. In these years he

intermittently turned his attention to his literary work as well as a collection of 'spiritual exercises', *The Saviors of God* which inflamed his ongoing conflict with the Orthodox Church. (Later the Catholic Church foolishly placed *The Last Temptation of Christ* on its *Index Librorum Prohibitorium*). His major literary enterprise in the 1920s was *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, an immense work modelled on Homer's epic. I haven't counted but I'm told that it comprises 33,333 lines of verse. He also worked as a translator (Homer, Dante, Nietzsche and Darwin) to augment his unsteady income. His works were only widely translated late in his life and he never earned a substantial income from them.

Over the last three and a half decades of his life Kazantzakis was peripatetic, living in France, Germany, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Czechoslovakia, Russia, China and Japan, as well as Greece. He liked to think that his ancestors included some Bedouin. He certainly got about! Sometimes his travel-lust seemed like an affliction. In one of his early travel journals he wrote, 'I've experienced most bitterly in my lifetime the horror of being obsessed by the longing to know other lands and people, and at the same time be compelled to rush away and leave them behind. Great strength and inhuman discipline are required to endure this.'[4] But elsewhere he declared 'Throughout my life, my greatest benefactors have been my travels and my dreams. Very few men, living or dead, have helped me in my struggles.' One person he might have mentioned was his wife, Helen, who managed all his business affairs and, as a writer of some distinction herself, helped him with his literary efforts, including the hackwork: she re-typed the *Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, all 33,333 lines of it, seven times, a feat deserving its own special tribute! After his death she published *Nikos Kazantzakis: A biography based on his letters* (1968). She outlived him by almost half a century, dying in 2004 at the age of 100.

In his middle years Kazantzakis was a great admirer of Lenin and sympathetic to the Soviet Union but was eventually disenchanted by the barbarities of the Stalinist regime. He had never been a party-member. He retained some faith in socialism but was a highly suspect figure on both the extreme left and right. The Russian Communist party hurled their routine insult at him, labelling him 'a bourgeois thinker' while the right-wing government in Greece denounced him as 'a Bolshevik trouble-maker', and 'a Russian agent' who wrote 'immoral books'. During the wartime Nazi occupation of Greece, Kazantzakis spent some time in England, otherwise living on the

island of Aegina where he continued his literary work, particularly his translation of *The Iliad*. He briefly involved himself in the Greek political scene after the war, temporarily leading a small leftist party before resigning to concentrate on his writing, explaining this transition this way:

> Having seen that I was not capable of using all my resources in political action, I returned to my literary activity. There lay the battlefield suited to my temperament. I wanted to make my novels the extension of my own father's struggle for liberty. But gradually, as I kept deepening my responsibility as a writer, the human problem came to overshadow political and social questions. All the political, social, and economic improvements, all the technical progress cannot have any regenerating significance, so long as our inner life remains as it is at present.[5]

Kazantzakis continued to upset politicians, ideologues, ecclesiastic authorities. Awards and honours came from other directions. He missed the 1957 Nobel Prize for literature by one vote, to Albert Camus who generously remarked that Kazantzakis deserved the honour '100 times more'. At the time Kazantzakis was in his final days, receiving medical treatment at the Frieberg University Clinic. Helen Kazantzakis tells us that her husband was the only person in the clinic who was not disappointed by the announcement, immediately sending a warm congratulatory message to Camus.[6] This was typical of his large-hearted spirit. He might have been forgiven for at least a glimmer of chagrin as he had been nominated for the prize nine times!

What manner of man was he? Well, a large question – but here's a snapshot from his wife: 'In my thirty-three years by his side I cannot recall ever being ashamed by a single bad action on his part. He was honest, without guile, innocent, infinitely sweet towards others, fierce only towards himself.'[7] In his last year he suffered from leukemia and died in Frieberg late in 1957, and was later buried in Heraklion. The epitaph on his tomb was one of his most well-known formulations: 'I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.'[8] His wife finished her biography with the following description of his passing,

> Confronting death as he had lived, he had just given up his soul. 'Like a king who had partaken of the festivity, then

risen opened the door and, without turning back, crossed the threshold.[9]

A stamp belatedly issued in 1983; official approval at last!

Kazantzakis produced a formidable body of work: eight novels, six travel books/memoirs, his 'autobiography', children's stories, eight plays, countless essays, some poetry, his study of Nietzsche, a collection of 'spiritual exercises" (*The Saviours of God*), a wealth of letters, translations, and various other bits and pieces. 'Prolific' is hardly the word! His various themes and preoccupations run through most of his work but perhaps his enduring significance rests on his fiction, particularly *Christ Recrucified*, *Freedom or Death*, *God's Pauper: Saint Francis of Assisi*, and *The Fratricides*, on the singular *Report to Greco*, and on his verse epic, *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel.* Our limited compass precludes any serious assessment of Kazantzakis as a creative writer, or any critique of him as a philosopher or spiritual wayfarer, allowing only some intimations of the cast of his mind, the colour of his temperament and the issues with which he was most deeply engaged.

What are Kazantzakis defining concerns and themes? Let's signal them by his own words, taken from a sample of his works. Many of the quotes listed below come from Kazantzakis' fictional protagonists whose utterances, more often than not, can be identified with the author (though this is not without its hazards). One might write a lengthy analysis of the tensions and conflicts in Kazantzakis's person and everywhere to be found in his writings: faith/belief and scepticism/unbelief; affirmation and negation; rationality and emotion; the 'freedom' of the flesh and the liberation of the spirit; hope and angst; Bergsonian vitalism and mystical yearning; conflict between the divergent human impulses which Dostoevsky so dramatically embodied in the Karamazov brothers. If readers can forgive the over-simplification, we might say that Kazantzakis has obvious affinities with Dmitri (sensuality, gratification of the instincts

and appetites, the rebellion against restraints), Ivan (rationality, cerebration) and Aloysha (spirituality). From another vantage point we might say that Kazantzakis was engaged in a never-ending struggle between his Odysseyian-Nietzschean drives and his attraction to the ideals and values personified by Christ and St Francis. He never committed himself to Orthodoxy and, as we have already noted, was accused by church authorities of holding heretical and blasphemous views. But no denying he was mesmerized by Christ of whom he wrote, 'Every man is half God, half man; he is both spirit and flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for a particular creed: it is universal.' The various tensions and contradictions to which I have referred were never merely intellectual puzzles for Kazantzakis; they were also deep psychic lacerations: 'The only thing I know', he wrote, 'is this: I am full of wounds and still standing on my feet'.

The following compilation of quotes provides some clues to his struggle.[10]

Spirit and Flesh, and the 'problem' of 'God'

• The struggle between God and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation. Most often this struggle is unconscious and short-lived. A weak soul does not have the endurance to resist the flesh for very long. It grows heavy, becomes flesh itself, and the contest ends. But among responsible men, men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty, the conflict between flesh and spirit breaks out mercilessly and may last until death (*Report to Greco*).

• My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh (*The Last Temptation*).

• The truth is that we all are one, that all of us together create god, that god is not man's ancestor, but his descendant (*Report to Greco*).

• Nothing is nearer to us than heaven. The earth is beneath our feet and we tread upon it, but heaven is within us (*God's Pauper*).

• The doors of heaven and hell are adjacent and identical (*The Last Temptation*).

• I am not tired, but the night is coming (*Report to Greco*).

• The real meaning of enlightenment is to gaze with undimmed eyes on all darkness.

• Behind all appearances, I divine a struggling essence. I want to merge with it (*The Saviors of God*).

• The ultimate stage of our spiritual exercise is called Silence (*The Saviors of God*).

Freedom

• You have everything but one thing: madness. A man needs a little madness or else he never dares cut the rope and be free (*Zorba the Greek*).

• Life on earth means: the sprouting of wings (*The Last Temptation*).

People, places, nature

• Every perfect traveller always creates the country where he travels.

• Everything in this world has a hidden meaning (*Zorba the Greek*).

• As long as there are flowers and children and birds in the world, have no fear: everything will be fine.

• I said to the almond tree: 'Speak to me of God' and the almond tree blossomed (*The Fratricides*).

• The more the intelligence unveils and violates the secrets of Nature, the more the danger increases and the heart shrinks (*Letter to Pierre* Sipriot).

Woman, the Feminine, Sexuality

• There is only one woman in the world. One woman, with many faces.

• If a woman sleeps alone, we, all men, are to blame. We shall have to answer for this on Judgement Day (*Zorba the Greek*).

• Behind each woman rises the austere, sacred and mysterious face of Aphrodite (*Zorba the Greek*).

The Human Condition

• I am a weak, ephemeral creature made of mud and dream. But I feel all the powers of the universe whirling within me (*The Saviors of God*).

• What a strange machine man is! You fill him with bread, wine, fish, and radishes, and out comes sighs, laughter, and dreams (*Zorba the Greek*).

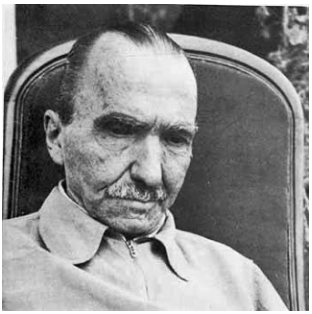
• Oh, yes. Wife. Children. Home. Everything. The full catastrophe (*Zorba the Greek*).

• We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life (*The Saviors of God*).

• How simple and frugal a thing is happiness: a glass of wine, a roast chestnut, a wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea… (*Zorba the Greek*).

• My soul comes from better worlds and I have an incurable homesickness of the stars.

What, then, might we finally say about this struggle? Perhaps the most disabling aspect of Kazantzakis' journey is that he fashioned 'God' in his own image, filtered through existential angst, Bergsonian vitalism and the Nietzschean phantasm of the *ubermensch*, and stained by his flirtation with nihilism and atheism. One can't altogether dismiss Colin Wilson's suggestion that Kazantzakis, with his constant self-torment and his reckless and fugitive enthusiasms, was 'like an impatient man trying to open a door the wrong way under the impression it is jammed'. [11] In the Kazantzakian lexicon 'God' often appears to be no more than a kind of psychic archetype of conflict and inner struggle, so central to his own life. He was not unaware of unresolved discord within himself: 'I have the heart of a pious man and it's full of demons'. Nonetheless, there is something noble in Kazantzakis' own intellectual and spiritual journey with all its anguish and incandescent intensity, and a certain grandeur in much of his writing: 'My soul comes from better worlds and I have an incurable homesickness of the stars.'



Principal Sources

For me the essential books Kazantzakis books are *Christ Recrucified, God's Pauper: Saint Francis, The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Report to Greco*; most Kazantzakis enthusiasts would also include *Zorba the Greek* and *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*. Of his travel/memoir books I found *Travels in Greece and Travels in China & Japan* the most interesting. Helen Kazantzakis' *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography based on his letters* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1968) is full of interesting material but is in danger of telling us more than we want to know.

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1 The narrator of *Zorba the Greek.*

2 These critical effusions came from reviewers in *The Spectator* and *Punch*, cited on the dust jacket of *Report to Greco*, 1965

3 The three films based on Kazantzakis' novels: *Zorba the Greek*, 1964, directed by Michael Cacoyannis; *He Who Must Die*, 1957, d. Jules Dassin (based on *Christ Recrucified*); *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988, d. Martin Scorsese.

4 This passage comes from an early travel journal recounting his visit to Sinai. Kazantzakis' travel writings of the 1920s were published in an Athenian newspaper but later collected, rewritten in the demotic language he came to favour, and posthumously published as *Journeying: Travels in Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Jerusalem and Cyprus*, 1961; English trans. 1975, ed. Theodora Vasils.

5 Letter to Pierre Sipriot, quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography based on his letters*, 1968, 529.

6 Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography*, 559.

7 Helen Kazantzakis, 'The Writing of *Report to Greco*', an Introduction to *Report to Greco*, 1965, 10.

8 A compression of a passage in *The Saviors of God*.

9 Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography*, 562.

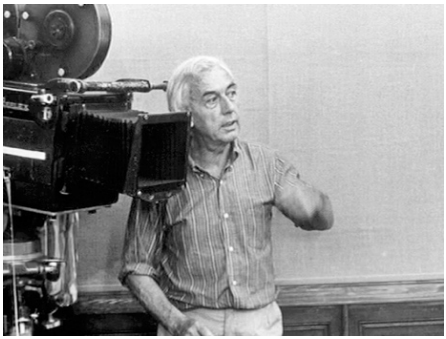
10 I have indicated sources where I have been able to rediscover them. Some come from jottings in my notebook, written down years ago. The quotes for which no source is given are all widely cited on the internet without any documentation; no guarantee they all actually came from Kazantzakis – but they sound Kazantzakian!

11 Colin Wilson, *The Strength to Dream*, 204.

ROBERT BRESSON

1901-1999

'the dangerous line'



Cinema is interior movement.

Following the ten-yearly *Sight and Sound* Critics' Poll of 2012 which nominated the 'greatest' 250 films ever made, Rodrigo Perez observed that the director with the most films selected was Robert Bresson, with seven, all the more impressive given that he had only directed thirteen features.[1] (He was followed by Howard Hawks, Luis Buñuel, Jean-Luc Godard, and Michael Powell-Emile Pressburger, all securing six spots each.) Such polls are somewhat fickle, shaped by shifting winds, more so today than ever before. Nonetheless, the poll reflected Bresson's exalted standing as one of the great auteurs of the cinema, one who has attracted the highest praise from fellow film-makers. Jean-Luc Godard: 'Bresson is the French cinema, as Dostoevsky is the Russian novel and Mozart is German music' – a formulation which now has wide currency when, for many cinephiles, Bresson's films are 'like the stations of the cross'.[2]

Bresson's life spanned the entire 20th century, the period in which the cinema was born, grew and blossomed, and, in its last three decades, slumped into a slow and apparently irreversible decline, at least in the Western world. His directorial career (1934-1983) coincided with the golden era in which the cinema was arguably *the* art-form of the century. Bresson's most fertile period as a film-maker – from *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) to *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971) – ran parallel to the *Nouvelle Vague*, part of that extraordinary

cinematic efflorescence which marked the very zenith of 'arthouse' cinema; for starters, apart from Bresson's fellow-countrymen in the *Cahiers du cinema* constellation (Godard, Chabrol, Truffaut et al), think Bergman, Dreyer, Rossellini, Visconti, Antonioni, or further afield, Ozu, Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray. But throughout Bresson stood as a film-maker with a unique vision and style quite unaffected, at least ostensibly, by what was going on around him. Jean Cocteau: 'Bresson is "apart" in this terrible trade.' While Bresson's films were venerated by many cinephiles the general film-going public was largely baffled, finding his work inaccessible and opaque, quite without the satisfactions offered by Hollywood. His own gnomic and sometimes koan-like statements about the cinema were not of much help: 'Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden'; 'Practice the precept: find without seeking'; 'The greater the success, the closer it verges on failure'; 'The ear is profound, whereas the eye is frivolous, too easily satisfied'; and perhaps most paradoxically of all, 'Cinema is interior movement' and 'Ideally, nothing should be shown, but that's impossible.'[3] Is he teasing us? No, he's serious!

Within France Bresson's work was heralded from the time of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) onwards, fervently championed by the *Cahiers* critics, but was usually met with blank incomprehension in the Anglosphere. We may take Stanley Kaufmann's observations about *Pickpocket* in one of the less obtuse reviews, as a representative specimen:

> The chief fault is that the hero is a vacancy, not a character. Martin Lasalle, who plays the part, has a bony, sensitive face, but no deader pan has crossed the screen since Buster Keaton. The besetting fallacy of modern French films and novels is the belief that nullity equals malaise and/or profundity.[4]

It was not until Susan Sontag's trail-blazing essay 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson' (1964) that his work attracted serious attention in the trans-Atlantic world.[5] But even then Bresson was a film-maker whose work was beyond the reach of many critics. Well, who was Robert Bresson and what was he up to? And wherein lie the peculiar distinctions of his films?

Bresson was born in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of central France, educated near Paris, studied philosophy at university, trained

and worked for several years as a painter, then as a photographer and script-writer, married, enlisted in the army, and was interred for eighteen months as a POW during WWII.[6] He lived in Paris in an apartment on the Île-Saint-Louis but also frequently retreated to a country house near Chartres. He was somewhat reclusive, avoided the razzle-dazzle of the arthouse circuit and rarely left France. After the death of his first wife he married Marie-Madeleine van der Mersch, his assistant director on *Four Nights of a Dreamer*. He had an abiding love of music and was a pianist of some accomplishment. He believed that aspiring film-makers should study music, painting and poetry rather than attend film school. (Good advice indeed!) He has been called a pessimist, a Jansenist, an ivory-tower dweller and 'the lonely giant of French cinema'. Friends have described him as 'grave', 'mysterious', 'aloof'', 'a man of unfailing courtesy' but one who, at least as a film-maker, was 'unwilling to compromise'.[7]

Bresson made his first full feature film, *Les anges du péché,* in 1943, a story concerning novice nuns involved in the care of women taken in from a nearby prison This was followed by *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne*, a highly polished, ice-cold melodrama turning on the time-honoured narrative staple of the romantic triangle. The film was scripted by Jean Cocteau from a story by Diderot. Michael Brooke has highlighted the ways in which this film drew a line under the first phase of Bresson's film-making:

> The brittle, scintillating *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945) was the end of a line: its formal elegance, Cocteau-scripted wit and overt theatricality would become anathema to Bresson, who spent the years following its commercial failure devising an approach to cinema closer to music and painting than to theatre and photography, eschewing professional writers and actors in favour of 'models' delivering their lines in a pallid monotone, often in voiceover. Ironically, many of these 'models', certainly including the donkey Balthazar, give performances as emotionally wrenching as any great classical tragedian.[8]

These first two features were *comparatively* conventional, but made with astonishing assurance and poise, especially by an apparent neophyte. The first was well received but the second took a pasting from the critics. (Jean Becker was one of its very few defenders.)

Despite its initial reception *Les anges du péché* remains something of a neglected treasure. Discounting Bresson's 1934 featurette *Affaires publiques* (a burlesque comedy of all things!), *Les anges* is one of the great debuts, surpassed in the French cinema only by Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), his first and last feature, and Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), the most audacious film of his long and patchy career (after *Blows* Truffaut should have stuck to film criticism). Perhaps we should add to the Honour Roll of French Debuts Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), and Jean-Pierre Melville's *La silence de la mer* (1949), the latter a precursor to much of Bresson's work.

In his first two features Bresson has not yet developed his own unique aesthetic nor settled on his later film-making *modus operandi*. Nevertheless, they display some of those stylistic moves and thematic concerns in which we later recognize the signature of the auteur: a ravishing visual sense controlled with rigour, precision and grace; a cool and detached but compassionate point of view; a highly charged narrative situation but one treated without histrionics or sentimentality; an interest in the Christian/Dostoeveskian themes of crime, sin, obsession, pride, guilt, punishment, grace and redemption. (Two of Bresson's films, *Pickpocket* and *A Gentle Woman,* were directly inspired by Dostoevsky while *Au hasard Balthazar* owes a less obvious debt to *The Idiot*.) On the other hand, these early films contrast with his later work through three conspicuous aspects which he disavowed: the use of professional actors, a heavy reliance on dialogue, and rich musical scores. It was probably for these reasons that Bresson was later rather dismissive about *Les anges du péché* … but we know that directors and writers are often not to be trusted in their judgements, especially about their own work. After all, John Ford's favourite amongst his own films was *The Sun Shines Bright*, a fine film certainly but comparable with his best? And Welles' personal favourite was *Chimes at Midnight*! In any event, whatever Bresson – or anyone else – has said about *Les anges*, it remains high in my estimation despite its comparatively modest position in the Bressonian *oeuvre* as a whole.

It was only in Bresson's third feature, *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) – the first film, he said, in which he knew what he was doing – that he abandoned most of the 'theatrical' conventions of the cinema and honed his own aesthetic; he never again worked with any collaborators on scripts nor used professional actors, rejected the use of background music, was very sparing in the use of close-ups and

flashbacks, and usually filmed with only one lens. From now on the films have the critics resorting to a battery of over-worked but unavoidable adjectives: minimalist, elliptical, austere, spare, rigorous, ascetic, formal, spiritual, religious, transcendent. *Diary* also foregrounded those thematic preoccupations which had been shaped by three formative influences: Bresson's Catholic upbringing, his immersion in visual art, and his incarceration during the war. These influences are writ large in the films themselves, most conspicuously in their pervasive religious-spiritual themes, the director's ongoing interest in aesthetics, and the recurrent narrative motif of imprisonment-liberation. Sontag insisted that all of Bresson's films have

> a common theme: the meaning of confinement and liberty. The imagery of the religious vocation and of crime are used jointly. Both lead to 'the cell'… the real drama of Bresson's stories is inner conflict: the fight against oneself. And all the static and formal qualities of his films work towards that end.[9]

A sharp insight but one which unduly circumscribes Bresson's concerns. Sontag also usefully notes that the 'inner conflict' is not presented in psychological but, most often in religious terms. Bresson: 'The psychologist only discovers what he can explain. I explain nothing.'[10]

The Bresson films featured in the Top 250, ranked by votes, were *Au hasard Balthazar, Pickpocket, A Man Escaped, Mouchette, L'Argent, Diary of a Country Priest,* and *The Devil Probably.* The first four are almost universally recognized as masterpieces, as is *Diary*. For my own part I would replace *L'Argent* and *The Devil Probably* with *Trial of Joan of Arc* and either *A Gentle Creature* or *Four Nights of a Dreamer*. Thus, under my reckoning, Bresson made his most distinguished films in an *uninterrupted* run, a veritable golden streak, between 1951 and 1971, rivalled only by Carl Dreyer's five consecutive features – *The Passion of Joan of Arc, Vampyr, Day of Wrath, Ordet, Gertrud* – but these made over nearly forty years. (The two most readily discernible cinematic influences on Bresson were the work of Dryer and of Jean-Pierre Melville.) Yasijuro Ozu, an auteur often compared to Bresson, put in another wondrous sequence of films between *Late Spring* (1949) and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), producing no less than *ten* films of the very first rank but interrupting

this miraculous flow with a few lesser films along the way. My own introduction to Bresson came in my earliest encounters with 'arthouse cinema'. It must have been 1967/8. The film was *Diary of a Country Priest*. I'd never seen anything like it. Along with Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* it marked the beginning of what seems to be a lifelong blessing/affliction: cinephilia.

An examination of Bresson's 'style' – the ways in which he exploits the expressive possibilities of the medium – is beyond our present purpose and scope. But such an exercise might start with Bresson's own somewhat paradoxical formulation, '*Cinema is interior movement*' by which I take him to refer to the inner worlds of both the characters and the spectator. What could be a more impossible undertaking, to deploy a primarily visual medium to express or evoke invisible inner states? What could be further from the Hollywood ethos of cinema as *spectacle*? To embark on such an enterprise entailed the development of 'a new way of writing', the elaboration, precisely, of a *style*. But for now I leave the reader to ponder a series of fragments from Bresson himself:[11]

> • Cinematography: *a new way of writing*, therefore of feeling.
>
> • Cinematography is a writing with images in movement and with sounds.
>
> • A film is *not a spectacle*; it is pre-eminently a *style*.
>
> • Two types of films: those that employ the resources of the theatre; those that employ the resources of cinematography.
>
> • Painting taught me to make not beautiful images but necessary ones.
>
> • Make visible, what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.
>
> • [When asked if he could summarize *Mouchette*] No. It can't be summarized. If it could, it would be awful.
>
> • An image or a sound on its own is nothing. It takes on meaning only in relationship to what transforms it… music shouldn't be used to underscore or emphasize but to *transform*.

• I'd rather people *feel* a film before understanding it. I'd rather feelings arise before intellect.

• There are so many things our eyes don't see. But the camera sees everything. We are too clever, and our cleverness plays us false. *Our intelligence disturbs our proper vision of things*.

• I think that in other films, actors speak as if they were on stage. As a result, the audience is used to theatrical inflections. That makes my non-actors appear unique, and thus, they seem to be speaking in a single new way. I want the essence of my films to be not the words my people say or even the gestures they perform, but what these words and gestures provoke in them. What I tell them to do or say must bring to light something they had not realized they contained. The camera catches it; *neither they nor I really know it before it happens*.

• Years ago, without realizing any program, I told my non-actors, 'Don't think of what you are saying or doing,' and that moment was the beginning of my style.

• You can't show everything. If you do, it's no longer art. *Art lies in suggestion*.

• Bring together things that have not yet been brought together and did not seem predisposed to be so.

• The eye solicited alone makes the ear impatient, the ear solicited alone makes the eye impatient. Use these impatiences. Power of the cinematographer who appeals to the two senses in a governable way. Against the tactics of speed, of noise, set tactics of slowness, of silence.

• When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it. The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer.

• When you do not know what you are doing and what you are doing is best – that is inspiration.

• Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by *immobility and silence*.

Note: I have omitted what many folk think is Bresson's most imposing and axiomatic work, *A Man Escaped* (1956) for two reasons: it is a long time since I saw it and I do not have a copy to hand; and secondly, it has been written about at great length. IMDb lists no less than 96 reviews. The reader should not construe its omission here to mean that I hold the film in anything less than the highest regard.

Diary of a Country Priest (1951)

Inspired by George Bernanos' novel, *Diary of a Country Priest* tells a sombre story of a naive young priest, dying of cancer, deeply troubled by his apparent inability to save the souls of his spiritually lazy, petty and sometimes malicious parishioners but able to find grace at the moment of death. It is the most austere, severe, troubling and formally beautiful film one can imagine (unless one calls to mind one of the director's later films!). Like all of Bresson's work it is demanding and difficult to watch for several reasons: the suffering of the priest, the cruelty of the world (and seemingly of God), the crisis of faith; the squalid realities of provincial life, unrelieved by any lyricism and only a few glimmers of human warmth; the relentlessly bleak perspective; the uncompromising asceticism of Bresson's method. The scene with the countess is devastating, as is the priest's death and its aftermath. The film, amongst other things, is a dramatization of Schiller's dictum that 'the world seeks to blacken what shines and to drag into the dust what is sublime'. Perhaps also of Dostoevsky's directive, 'accept suffering and be redeemed by it'. Still, some difficulties remain: Is there a direct or inverse relationship between the priest's spiritual state and his stomach cancer? Is there something spiritually unhealthy in his make-up of which the cancer is an 'objective correlative', or is the cancer the worldly opposite of his spiritual purity? Perhaps the tension between these two possibilities is what gives the film its extraordinary tension and power. As to its religious themes, recall this from one of Bresson's interviews:

> Interviewer: Do you believe that there is anybody that does not partake in this essential soul. For example, is an atheist outside your audience?
>
> Bresson: No, he is not. Besides, there are no real atheists.

Diary was the first of Bresson's films to garner international acclaim, winning the Grand Prize at the Venice film festival.

Pickpocket (1959)
Michel is an alienated and lost young man who becomes an adroit pickpocket and thief, not in search of wealth but as an act of self-assertion; the money itself is of very little account. He plays a cat-and-mouse game with a police inspector and forms a sort of half-relationship with a young woman who has been looking after his dying mother. The story is inspired, obviously, by *Crime and Punishment*. Bresson has distilled Dostoevsky's massive and far-reaching inquiry into crime, punishment, self-will, guilt, grace and redemption into a simple and elemental story, and transposed it to late 50s' Paris (Camus/Sartre type existentialism and nihilism are the order of the day rather than the Nietszchean variety we get in Dostoevsky). In Melvillian fashion Bresson delineates the 'craft' and 'aesthetics' of crime: doors, locks, stairs, pockets, hands, bars, handcuffs, caresses. Had Bresson seen Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* with which it shares a good deal, especially concerning pickpocketing business?[12]

Dostoevsky's stupendous novel is highly melodramatic: Bresson's film is spare and restrained. Each in its own way achieves the most powerful effects. The film is stripped of many of the conventions of mainstream cinema: psychological motivation, the cause-and-effect chain, spectatatorial identification, the resolution of narrative enigmas, and so on. None of this is at all surprising in a Bresson film. *Pickpocket* is an exemplary case study in Bresson's methods and preoccupations, his peerless cinematic poetry. Assuredly one of his front-line masterworks.

Trial of Joan of Arc (1962)
Based *entirely* on the actual trial transcripts and shot in Bresson's remorseless style, *Trial of Joan of Arc* is all the more powerful for the absence of editorializing and audience manipulation, all the more chilling that the ecclesiastical authorities are not depicted as evil or corrupt but rather as cowards and opportunists. *Trial* is perhaps Bresson's most extreme 'experiment' in 'non-expressive' cinema. It brings to mind Bresson's remark that 'I always shoot on the dangerous line between showing too much and not showing enough. I try to work as if I were on a tightrope with a precipice

at either side'. I would need to see Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* again to make any intelligent comparisons; but in any event, both are astonishing works. I found Dreyer's expressionistic treatment of the story more harrowing, more traumatic… but this is bad enough! Susan Sontag, an early champion of Bresson, dismisses the film as 'too rarefied':

> Bresson has experimented with the limits of the unexpressive… It could have worked. But it doesn't – because she [Florence Carrez) is the least luminous of all [Bresson's] presences…. The thinness of Bresson's latest film, is, partly a failure of communicated intensity….[13]

Well, it's good to know that Sontag was sometimes wrong. For my own part I found more than enough 'communicated intensity'. Incidentally, Bresson said of Joan of Arc, 'For me, she is the most extraordinary person who ever lived'.[14]

Au hasard Balthazar (1966)
An astounding film in which the leading character is a donkey! A poetic-cinematic meditation on Christian themes, a deeply spiritual film. Like most Bresson films it is gruelling but pervaded by the most delicate tenderness whilst confronting the gamut of vices and human evil: greed, pride, lust, hard-heartedness, apathy, cruelty. It is painfully moving; the end was almost too much for me. No need to comment on the altogether characteristic Bressonian style, techniques, effects etc. What is most distinctive about this film, apart from the daring narrative strategy of structuring the film around a donkey, is the tone and mood of the film: poignant, haunting, stoic, elegiac, compassionate. A vision at once terrible and noble, delivered in a quiet and mild tone, altogether free of sentimentality or moralizing but leaving one quite shattered and exhausted.[15] If the *Sight and Sound* poll is to be believed, it is the most revered of Bresson's works though not everyone was impressed; Ingmar Bergman was fulsome in his praise of *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Mouchette* but found *Balthazar* boring and soporific. Grumpy!

Mouchette (1967)
The story is set in a French village. Mouchette, a surly young peasant girl suffers humiliations at the hands of her family, schoolmates and others in the village. The film is an unflinching look at human venality,

corruption, cruelty, and cowardice. Bresson paradoxically deepens our involvement with Mouchette by making her unattractive. The rape scene is as intense and as disturbing as anything in the cinema. A heart-rending experience which no one but Bresson could have pulled off.

The dodg'em car scene goes on too long. Despite thinking hard about it, this is the only criticism – a trifling one – which I can mount. Some questions: What does the ending, no body in the water, signify? Was Mouchette never an embodied mortal? Is it a case of the resurrection of the body as well as the soul? What is it about George Bernanos' books that makes them so amenable to Bressonian transformation on the screen? Bresson was asked about this: 'I was attracted by the same thing, on a different scale, that attracts me in Dostoyevsky. Both writers are searching for the soul.'[16] As to the various enigmas in *Mouchette*, Bresson remarked, 'I explain nothing, and you can understand it any way you like'.[17]

A Gentle Woman (1969)
Bresson at his most opaque and enigmatic. A desolate tale about a loveless marriage between two incompatible people, one an empty vessel, the other a lost soul struggling against spiritual and psychological confinement. Open to any number of different readings … but, whatever else, a meditation on human aloneness and the loss of any sense of the spiritual and transcendent in a hectic, materialistic and mechanized world. The usual Bressonian techniques, if that's the word. Also a film of entries and exits! Does the very short scene with the crucifix provide a key to the film's central concerns?

I have difficulty with Bresson in colour, in contemporary Paris; he belongs to the unchanging French countryside, and his visuals are more haunting in BW.

Four Nights of a Dreamer (1971)
Loosely adapted from a Dostoevsky novella, a story of young love, unrequited passion, erotic yearnings, fragile dreams and romantic loss. The two young people might answer to the title of one of Dostoevsky's great novels, 'The Insulted and the Injured'. As usual, the style is stark but also sometimes lyrical and beautiful, while the tone is sometimes ironic but never cynical. The film might be read as an obliquely humorous take on a kind of narcissistic romanticism which pervaded much of the *Nouvelle Vague* cinema of the late 50s

and 60s, as Byronic romanticism influenced so many of the young Dostoevsky's contemporaries. But Bresson 'stands apart'.

*

Is there a more distinctive and imposing corpus of films in the whole of cinema than Bresson's? A luminary in the cinematic pantheon for sure but one quite beyond the ken of a certain kind of critic.[18] One explanation is obvious enough: many critics and film theorists, like the overwhelming majority of the Western 'intelligentsia' in general, have little sense of the spiritual and transcendental, and precious little sympathy for anything which might be deemed religious. What can Bresson's cinema mean to such folk beyond being a bold, cerebral and idiosyncratic exercise in search of 'a new way of writing'? In the same vein it might be observed that Bresson's cinema remains immune to the ideological preoccupations and critical methods of recent film theory; his films are quite intractable when approached with the conceptual and analytical apparatus of the various 'isms' which have tyrannized so much film discourse in the decades since his last film. One may as well try to trace the footprints of birds in the sky!

Principal Sources

Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977); Charles Thomas Samuels, 'Encountering Directors: Robert Bresson', interview in Paris, 2 September, 1970 (online); Susan Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', originally published in *Against Interpretation* (1964), reproduced in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Penguin Books, 1982); Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018; first published in 1972); Richard Roud, 'Robert Bresson' in *Cinema, A Critical Dictionary: The Major Film-Makers*, Vol 1, ed. R. Roud (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980); Jim Hillier (ed), *Cahiers du Cinéma: the 1950s – Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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1 See Rodrigo Perez, '*Sight and Sound* Top 250 by the Numbers', *Indie Wire* (on-line).

2 Roger Ebert, 'Robert Bresson was master of understatement', 23 Dec, 1999; rogerebert.com/ robert-bresson-was-master-of-understatement.

3 These cryptic statements are taken from Bresson's *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975), his only published writing on cinema. It appeared in English translation in 1977.

4 Kaufmann quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, Review of *Les modeles de 'Pickpocket'*; 1 April, 2004; chicagoreader.com/film/defending-bresson

5 Sontag's essay appeared in *Against Interpretation (1964).* It is reproduced in *A Susan Sontag Reader,* Penguin Books, 1983. As far as I know, the first British book on Bresson was a collection of essays edited by one of the *Movie* proponents of the auteur theory, Ian Cameron: *The Films of Robert Bresson*, 1970. This was soon to be followed by what has become a standard work, Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in the Cinema: Bresson, Ozu and Dreyer* (1972).

6 Biographical details of Bresson's early life are sketchy. The conventional birth year is 1901 but some scholars believe he was born in 1907. Does it matter? Bresson was reticent about his background and guarded his own privacy zealously, as has his widow. He was, apparently, arrested by the Nazi occupiers for his role in the French Resistance but I have been unable to locate any details.

7 For a few biographical fragments see Brian Baxter's Obituary, 'Cinematic genius in search of inner passion and complexity', *The Guardian*, 22 Dec, 1999.

8 Michael Brooke, 'Robert Bresson: Alias Grace'; old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49407.

9 Susan Sontag, Susan Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson' (1964) in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, 128, 129.

[10] Charles Thomas Samuels, 'Encountering Directors: Robert Bresson', interview in Paris, 2 September, 1970; mastersofcinema.org/bresson/Words/CTSamuels.html

[11] Taken from *Notes on the Cinematographer* and the Paris Interview (italics mine).

[12] Rick Thompson has pondered this very question: 'It is hard to imagine that Bresson had not seen Samuel Fuller's *Pickup On South Street* (1953) and based his *Pickpocket* sequences upon it – particularly Fuller's opening subway sequence – but Fuller's film did not have a French release until 1961. On the other hand, *Pickup* was screened at the 1954 Venice Film Festival, at which it won a grand prize. There are many interesting points of comparison between the two films, including: the death of a mother-figure; the hero's problem making a commitment to the potential lover; a series of philosophical dialogues between the pickpocket hero and his police antagonist; the interlinking of pocketpicking and sexuality; and the construction of the pickpocket hero as an extreme and deliberate outsider'; sensesofcinema.com.

[13] Susan Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', 128.

[14] Paris Interview.

[15] The extras on the Umbrella DVD include intensely interesting discussions of the film with Godard, Louis Malle, Marguerite Duras and Bresson himself. Godard calls the film 'Life in 90 minutes'.

[16] Paris Interview.

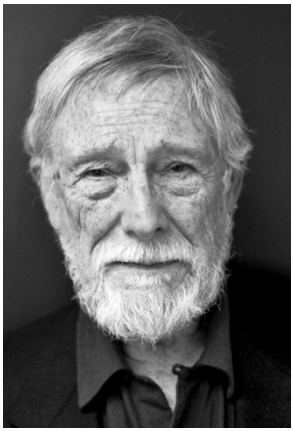
[17] Paris Interview.

[18] I don't believe either Robin Wood or Andrew Sarris or Peter Bogdanovich, three critics to whom I often turn despite their obvious limitations (different in each case), have ever even mentioned Bresson!

GARY SNYDER

1930-

'dharma bum'



Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.

In his autobiography Alan Watts describes Gary Snyder as

> a wiry sage with high cheek-bones, twinkling eyes, and a thin beard, and the recipe for his character requires a mixture of Oregon woodsman, seaman, Amerindian shaman, oriental scholar, San Francisco hippie, and swinging monk, who takes tough discipline with a light heart.[1]

Jack Kerouac had already conferred immortality of a sort on Snyder through the character of Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* while Lawrence Ferlinghetti called him 'the Thoreau of the Beat Generation'. Snyder, born in California in 1930, was raised on small farms in Washington and Oregon. As a young man he worked as logger, seaman, fire-look-out and trail crew worker for the US Forest Service. Snyder had been interested in Asian cultures since being impressed as a boy by Chinese landscape paintings in the Seattle Art Museum. At Reed College Snyder studied anthropology, linguistics, literature and American Indian culture. While still a student, with his friend Philip Whalen, Snyder began a systematic and disciplined study of Buddhism after reading translations of the Chinese classics

by Pound and Waley in the late 40s as well as R.H. Blyth's four-volume translation, *Haiku* (1949-1952) – also being read by his friends Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.[2] In 1951 D.T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* provided Snyder's first introduction to Zen, and helped him to understand some of the connections between Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. His study of Far Eastern landscape painting as a meditative practice inspired him to apply the same principles to his own writing which was also informed by his interest in Chinese and Japanese poetry. Snyder became a fine translator of such works as the Cold Mountain poems of Han Shan. In 1959 Snyder published his first book, *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems*. By this time he was firmly identified with the Beat movement which he characterized this way:

> In a way the Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes a literary motif, and then we added some Buddhism to it.[3]

His interest in Buddhism ran so deep that in May 1956, aided by Alan Watts and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, he left America to spend much of the next ten years in study in Japan, becoming a disciple of Rinzai Zen master Oda Sesso Roshi, Abbot of Daitoku-ji in Kyoto, and eventually taking lay monastic vows.[4] (Snyder is but one of a wave of westerners who have found their way into Japanese monasteries since Rudolf Otto's visit in 1912: one may mention such figures as Ruth Fuller Sasazki, Philip Kapleau, Robert Aitken, Irmgard Schloegl, Jan van der Wetering, Harold Stewart, Clive Faust, Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, Elsie Mitchell, Richard Baker, Jan der Wetering, Jiyu Kennett, Gerta Ital, Peter Matthiessen.)

Snyder returned briefly to America in 1958 and was one of the contributors to a special 'Zen' issue of the *Chicago Review*, a signpost to the mushrooming American interest in Zen. The issue included Snyder's essay 'Spring *Sesshin* at Sokoku-ji', Alan Watts' 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', translations of Chinese and Japanese classics by D.T. Suzuki and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, poems by Kerouac and Whalen.[5] Snyder also traveled throughout India in 1962 with his wife Joanne Kyger[6] and Allen Ginsberg; in *Passage through India* he recounted experiences in the sub-continent which 'deepened, widened and

saddened' his mind.[7] They visited Bodhgaya and the Deer Park of Sarnath and had an audience with the Dalai Lama: the main subject of their questionings seems to have been drug-induced experiences (one of the staples of both the Beat and hippie movements in which Snyder and Ginsberg were leading lights).[8] In a more recent Foreword to that book Snyder highlights his understanding of India this way:

> I honor India for many things: those neolithic cattle breeders who sang daily love songs to God and Cow, as a family, and whose singing is echoed even today in the recitation of the Vedas and the sutra chanting of Los Angeles and Japan. The finest love poetry and love sculpture on earth. Exhaustive meditations on mind and evocations of all the archetypes and images. Peerless music and dance. But most, the spectacle of a high civilisation and accomplished art, literature and ceremony without imposing a narrow version of itself on every tribe and village. Civilisation without centralization or monoculture… no culture but India prior to modern times imagined such a scale of being–light years vast universes, light year size leaps of time. Dramas of millions of lifetimes reborn. How did they do it? Soma? Visitors from Outer Space? Nah. I think just Big Mind drank in with Himalayan snow-melt rivers and seeing Elephant's ponderous daintiness, and keeping ancient shamanistic sages and forest hermits fed on scraps of food, to hear and respect their solid yoga studies. The Buddha Shakyamuni, one of those, was loved, and listened to by cowgirls, traders, and courtesans.[9]

After his return from Japan Snyder plunged into the late 60s counter-culture which was 'eclectic, visionary, polytheistic, ecstatic and defiantly devotional'.[10] More distinctively, he 'attempted to work out an alternative ethic which drew on both Buddhist and native American ideals, as well as American natural rights ideology',[11] one which he expressed in his poetry, his talks and essays (which reveal considerable though lightly-worn learning and a mind of great suppleness), and through social and ecological activism. His capsule summary of Buddhist teachings: 'impermanence, no-self, the inevitability of suffering and connectedness, emptiness, the vastness

of mind, and a way to realisation'.[12] Taking his cue from Blake's 'Energy is Eternal Delight', in *Turtle Island* Snyder wrote this:

> Delight is the innocent joy arising
> with the perception and realisation of
> the wonderful, empty, intricate,
> inter-penetrating,
> mutually-embracing, shining
> single world beyond all discriminations
> or opposites.

In a nutshell, Buddhist metaphysic as the basis for ecological awareness. Throughout his life Snyder has been deeply concerned with 'our ethical obligations to the nonhuman world', a notion, he says, which 'rattles the foundations of occidental thought'.[13] Thanks to the sustained efforts of poets and writers like Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Wes Jackson (among many others), the idea now has a much wider currency. Also among Snyder's most notable achievements has been his sensitive and intelligent receptivity to the traditional spiritual economies of Native Americans.

Snyder has also been one of a stream of writers who have drawn on Eastern spirituality and philosophy in their attempts to fashion a new aesthetic and fresh expressive modes – poetic, in Snyder's case. As one commentator noted,

> All of Snyder's study and work has been directed toward a poetry that would approach phenomena with a disciplined clarity and that would then use the 'archaic' and 'primitive' as models to once again see this poetry as woven through all parts of our lives.[14]

Snyder has published several collections of essays and some fifteen-odd volumes of poetry, one of which, *Turtle Island* (1974), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (1996) is a useful compendium of four decades of essays on culture, nature and poetics. Snyder has often been interviewed in the forums of counter-cultural America, has pounded the 'alternative' lecture circuit visiting, he says, 'practically every university in the United States'[15] and has been an energetic advocate of many ecological causes: the 'unofficial poet laureate of the environmentalist movement'. Along with Robert Aitken, Joanna

Macy, and Richard Baker he was a founder, in 1978, of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, a sign of the increasing interest amongst Western dharma practitioners in welding together Eastern spiritual practice and Western forms of social and political activism; 'engaged Buddhism' became one of the terms by which such concerns came to be identified. This vein of 'spiritual politics' has many antecedents in American Romanticism and Transcendentalism. In recent years Snyder has evinced more interest in a non-adversarial political agenda, has become more open to *bhaktic* forms of religious practice, and has been increasingly influenced by the great 13th century master Dogen Zenji.[16] He still practices *zazen*. Let us leave Snyder with the words of Jim Dodge:

> Having achieved the 'mythopoetic interface of society, ecology, and language' that he chose as his fields of inquiry, his point of multiple attention, Gary Snyder is justly honoured as an elder in the environmental movement, a revolutionary social critic, an excellent translator, a Buddhist scholar and eminent practitioner, and, of course, a premier poet. He is also a nature writer of surpassing lucidity… one of the great synthesizing intellects of our age… a Warrior of the Imagination.[17]

Snyder and Philip Whalen at a temple in Shimoyama, Japan

Principal Sources

Readers coming to Snyder's work for the first time might start with *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 1995) or *The Gary Snyder Reader: Poetry, Prose, and Translations, 1952-1998* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 1999). On Buddhism and the Beat movement see Carole Tonkinson, ed, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation,* Riverhead, 1995.

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1 Alan Watts, *In My Own Way*, Vintage, 1972, 439.

2 See P. Barry Chowka, 'The *East West* Interview' (April 1977), reproduced in Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1979,* New Directions, 1980, 92-137. (Of the many interviews Snyder has given over the years the discussion with Chowka remains one of the most illuminating.)

3 Snyder quoted in Carole Tonkinson (ed), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation,* Riverhead, 1995, 172.

4 For some comments by Snyder on the Roshi see Chowka, 'The East West Interview', 97-98.

5 Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Shambhala, 1992, 220-221.

6 Snyder and Kyger separated soon after the trip to Indian and divorced in 1965. In 1967 Snyder married Masa Uehara whom he met in Osaka and with whom he was to have two children. They divorced in 1989. Soon after he married Carole Lynn Koda, a Japanese-American writer.

7 It is interesting to compare Ginsberg and Snyder's respective accounts of their trip in *Indian Journals March 1962 – May 1963,* City Lights, 1970*,* and *Passage Through India*, Grey Fox, 1983.

8 Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 294-295.

9 Gary Snyder, *Passage Through India*, x.

10 Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 248.

11 J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, Routledge, 1997, 104.

12 C. Trevor, 'The Wild Mind of Gary Snyder', *Shambhala Sun* (online).

13 Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds*, Counterpoint, 1995, 246.

14 S. McLean, Introduction to G. Snyder, *The Real Work*, xiii.

15 C. Trevor, 'The Wild Mind of Gary Snyder'.

16 Ibid.

17 J. Dodge, Foreword to Gary Snyder, *The Gary Snyder Reader: Poetry, Prose, and Translations, 1952-1998*, Counterpoint, 1999, xix.

KATHLEEN RAINE

1908-2003

keeping 'the divine vision'

Against the nihil
One candle flame, one blade of grass
One thought suffices
To affirm all.

Kathleen Raine discovered her vocation as a poet as a young child. Her father was an English teacher and a lay Methodist preacher while her mother was immersed in the Scottish tradition passed down in 'song, speech and heroic story'. During the Great War young Kathleen lived with her aunt in a small hamlet in Northumberland which became 'her touchstone of wild beauty, simplicity and innocence',[1] an experience she later described in her autobiography: 'I loved everything about it. In Northumberland *I knew myself in my own place*; and I never "adjusted" myself to any other or forgot what I had so briefly but clearly seen and understood and experienced'.[2] It was to be the wellspring of her poetry along with her Scottish heritage where 'poetry was [still] the essence of life'. Among the early literary influences were the Bible, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, and Scottish ballads, a literary and cultural tradition 'laden with treasures of beauty and wisdom' which she 'inherited

intact' but which, she was soon to discover as a student at Cambridge, was being squandered, 'thrown away'.[3]

Raine is best known for her 'distinctly contemplative and mystical type of poetry'[4], informed by Shelley's dictum that 'Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man'.[5] But my primary concern here is with her advocacy of traditional ideas and the *sophia perennis* which became increasingly central in her later life. But before that a few biographical fragments: the allure of the natural world in her childhood and the influence of her father's literary enthusiasms and her mother's love of the oral traditions of Scotland; the study of natural sciences at Girton College, Cambridge (although an aspiring poet, she was not attracted to the academic study of literature; Academe was 'Satan's last and subtlest temptation of the poet'[6]); the first publication of her poems, written while living in the Lake District;[7] an early, unhappy and short-lived marriage, followed by a second marriage which yielded two children; a precarious livelihood based on part-time teaching, book reviewing and translation work; several tempestuous and ill-fated affairs, including an intense but disastrous relationship with the naturalist-writer Gavin Maxwell, the love of her life but the erotic potential of the relationship thwarted by his homosexuality.[8] After the break-up with Maxwell Raine seems to have renounced romantic relationships, assessing her young adulthood with 'ruthless severity' and 'devastating frankness'; she described herself in young adulthood as 'a neurotic bohemian' seduced by the materialism and nihilism which pervaded Cambridge.

Raine now turned her creative energies to lyrical poetry and scholarship which, in its earliest phase, had focused on the great English visionary, artist and poet, William Blake, on whom she became an authority, albeit a controversial one. Blake remained her pole-star for many years and Raine published several books about him. The definitive work is *Blake and Tradition* (1969) which, as C.S. Lewis declared, made all previous studies obsolete. In that work Raine rescued Blake from the conventional picture of a semi-crazed and highly idiosyncratic artist doing his own peculiar thing, showing how he was rooted in a tradition stretching back to Plato. She also wrote extensively on Thomas Taylor, Wordsworth, Coleridge and W.B. Yeats ('the singing master of the soul') as well as completing translations of Balzac and other French authors.

Raine rejected modernist and *avant garde* fashions and ideological agendas in both her poetry and criticism.

> Believing as I do that poetry is in its proper nature the language of the soul; that its proper function is to create for us images of an inner order all share, to open into every present those secret doors, those ways in; to consecrate and redeem for every generation some parcel of the surrounding waste, I cannot feel that those poets of the thirties, brilliantly and admirably as they may have performed some other social role, were fulfilling the proper and vital task of poetry.[9]

Over the years she was to write on a wide range of poets, most of them ignored or disparaged by the literary Establishment: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edwin Muir, Vernon Watkins, David Gascoyne, David Hopkins, and Saint-John Perse. The title of one her critical collections, *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967), is suggestive of her interests and proclivities. Throughout her life she continued to write poetry, publishing over a dozen volumes, starting with *Stone and Flower* in 1943. Raine also wrote a three-volume autobiography and a late book about her discovery of India (first visited in the 70s, and three times thereafter), especially its philosophical and religious traditions.[10] From her inaugural address to the Temenos Academy in 1991:

> In the course of a long lifetime I have visited many countries, and many goodly states and kingdoms seen, of the mind and in this world also. But the place of arrival could only be the source of that 'Oriental philosophy' which belongs neither to East nor to West in terms of geography, but is the 'Orient' of light both natural and spiritual. I had worked my passage to India by way of Blake and Yeats, of Plotinus and Thomas Taylor the Platonist; and I had already passed my seventieth birthday when I arrived in that deeply wounded country, which yet remains the last custodian of the philosophy whose wisdom includes all others.[11]

Her personal qualities? One account: 'She always lived by her own lights. Haughty, imperious, almost royal in her bearing, she was formidable'.[12] She had no high opinion of many contemporary writers, evident, for instance, in her dismissal of Anthony Burgess

and Iris Murdoch as 'journalists'. (Time may prove her right!) Friends called her 'proud', 'intransigent', 'bracing', 'commanding'. One observed that some people found her 'authoritarian, remote, aristocratic, patrician, unapproachable' but spoke also of her 'ultimate generosity' in devoting her life to enriching the spiritual lives of others. Her own religious moorings shifted several times: from the Methodism in which she was raised, to Roman Catholicism, to Platonism and the philosophies of the East, Raine ultimately resolving both existential and intellectual tensions through her deepening understanding of the *sophia perennis.*

Of her poetry, one of her friends and collaborators, Brian Keeble, has written this:

> From the beginning Kathleen Raine's poetry combined a singular clarity of sight and diction with a voice distinctly her own in which the forms of nature are seen with a directness that is without conventional sentiment yet coupled with an affinity of mood and an intimacy of imaginative vision that penetrates to the numinous core of natural forms. This imaginative perspective, whose nature preserves the vestiges of an Edenic, prelapsarian innocence, set her apart from the modernist agenda, with its readiness to innovate and adopt the materialist values of the contemporary, secular culture. This was for her an occlusion of vision rather than an extension of imaginative response.[13]

Raine won many honorary degrees and awards including the Queen's Medal for Poetry, Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and *Commandeur* of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, an honour which especially gratified her as a lifelong Francophile. When asked how she would like to be remembered she recalled Blake's response to the same question: 'That in time of trouble, I kept the divine vision'. She died in London after being knocked down in the street by a reversing car, breaking her hip and subsequently catching pneumonia. She was 95. Towards the end an Indian friend read to her daily from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

*

In later life Raine became increasingly preoccupied with the preservation of the *sophia perennis*, the Wisdom of the Ages which she discerned in the mythological, religious and poetic/folkloric traditions of both the East and the West. Her work on Blake, initially influenced by Jungian ideas, and her later writings on Yeats, demonstrated her close familiarity with Hermetic, neo-Platonic, Kabbalistic and Vedantic philosophy. In mid-life her outlook was redirected and refined by the work of René Guénon to which she had been introduced by Philip Sherrard, one of her collaborators in an enterprise to which she devoted herself in the last two decades of her life: establishing the journal *Temenos* and subsequently the Temenos Academy, a forum for the repudiation of the 'Single Vision' which tyrannized the modern outlook and the reaffirmation of the traditional outlook and its attendant spiritual values. It was her unbending conviction that 'the renewal of the learning of the universal language of metaphysical and imaginative discourse, common to East and West', but long neglected in the West, and increasingly so in the East also, is essential to our survival as civilized beings'.[14]

In 1986 a group of artists, writers and scholars gathered in South Devon for the First Temenos Conference on the theme 'Art and the Renewal of the Sacred'. Among the attendees who were to play a crucial role in the subsequent establishment of the Temenos Academy were Raine, Keith Critchlow (architect and geometer), Brian Keeble (publisher and author), and Philip Sherrard (Orthodox perennialist, author and Hellenophile). These four subsequently became the editors of the *Temenos Academy Review*, a successor to the *Temenos* journal which they had established in 1980. A blurb for the 1986 Conference announced its agenda:

> … to reaffirm and redefine the function of the arts as the mirror of the human spirit. In the present situation society is suffering from the loss of any value-system which corresponds to our true needs and nature, and a new examination of the fundamental principles of life is of vital importance. From time immemorial the arts have been the medium for the expression and spreading of the human vision of the sacredness of life. At present the finer values in society have succumbed to the reductionist and materialist ideologies which threaten our very survival.[15]

Apart from those already mentioned, speakers at the conference included Wendell Berry, Jocelyn Godwin, Satish Kumar and Yoshikazu Iwamoto. The Academy was formally established in 1991 under the patronage of the Prince of Wales (now King Charles III) who generously provided Raine with a workplace, a suite of rooms in his Institute of Architecture. Raine developed a close relationship with the prince to whom she was quite devoted and who, she was convinced, would one day make a fine monarch. Prince Charles, in turn, showed a deep affection and respect for Raine. He delivered an eloquent and heartfelt eulogy at a memorial service held after her death.[16]

The Academy continues to present courses in the perennial philosophy which 'runs like a golden thread through history and offers each generation contact with the values that nourish all civilisations' (except, it hardly need be added, our own). The Academy also sponsors public lectures and exhibitions, maintains the *Review*, and has a close association with the Prince's School of Traditional Arts. The Temenos website welcomes readers with Raine's verse, 'Against the nihil' which stands as the epigraph for the present essay. The Temenos Academy and its journal remain a conspicuous part of Raine's enduring legacy.

We might note in passing that Sherrard later mounted quite a severe critique of Kathleen Raine's understanding of the psyche and what he saw as her over-valuation of the Imagination.[17] Sherrard's article also exposes other divergences in their respective understanding of the perennial philosophy as espoused by Guénon, Schuon et al. Raine does not seem to have been upset by his criticisms. After his death she wrote a gracious tribute to Sherrard.[18]

Raine's work in her later years was always addressed to the fundamental spiritual malaise of modernity and to its remedy in the 'ancient springs' of Tradition:

> There are but two alternatives. The first alternative is that of secular materialism – appealing to the authority of a science whose only reality is the measurable – 'nothing is sacred' – and no bounds set to destructive exploitation. The second alternative – embraced in every tradition of wisdom – holds that man and nature alike are a manifestation of immeasurable spirit. If that is so, we are custodians of a world in which, in William Blake's words, 'everything that lives is holy' and our sacred trust.[19]

'Man and nature alike' might be taken as a key to Raine's vision. It is by experientially 'knowing' the natural world that we recognize the *correspondences* between the created order and ourselves and thus come to know our own 'boundless selves' as inseparable from the 'immeasurable spirit'. Nature was a sacred text, a theophany.

I've read all the books but one
Only remains sacred: this
Volume of wonders, open
Always before my eyes.

A profane materialistic science is not only of no help but is a barrier to any awakening to the Real (in whatever terms we might describe it). Wendell Barry has well summarized Raine's vision of the cosmos and our place in it:

> This is the created, the God-given world, seen as existing within the circumstances of eternity. It is a mortal world which nevertheless foreshadows its own immortality, a temporal world nevertheless suffused with 'the translucence of the Eternal'. In the magnitude and magnanimity of this timely and eternal world, our life has its true stature and standing. Eternity is a disturbing circumstance… but it is also the circumstance of our highest aspirations and privileges. It is the circumstance in which the arts, in Blake's phrase, converse with Paradise.[20]

For Raine the way forward was a way back: a return to those modes of understanding and those values which informed traditional societies, and which were still preserved in arts and crafts where the practitioners had not surrendered to the spiritually sterile fashions of modernity, artists still in search of the True, the Good and the Beautiful. In a late essay she posed a troubling question:

> Poets of the imagination write of the soul, of intellectual beauty, of the living spirit of the world. What does such work communicate to readers who do not believe in the soul, in the spirit of life, or in anything that can be called 'the beautiful'?[21]

While Raine was tireless in her affirmation of the *sophia perennis* she was not unaware of the cyclic conditions to which Guénon had

alerted the world in *The Reign of Quantity* (1945), the 'Latter Days', the Kali Yuga, in which we find ourselves. One of her late poems which she deliberately placed last in *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine*, was 'Millennial Hymn to the Lord Shiva', a 'polyphonic harmony', as Grevel Lindrop described it[22]. Brian Keeble observes that the poem

> made final use of another traditional motif that informed much of her work – that of the Kali Yuga – and spoke with a prophetic urgency of how our time, witness to the death of culture and therefore of the immemorial patterns of human life shaped at all levels by a vision of the sacred nature of reality, must take its part in the greater cycle of creation and destruction that is at once 'the unknowable mystery' and the 'holy fire' that liberates and purifies.[23]

One might conclude this brief account of Raine's life and work with any one of the many tributes which flowed forth after her death, coming from all over the world and from creative people of 'high degree' in the circles in which Raine moved. One may mention as a sample such figures as John Carey, Keith Critchlow, the Prince of Wales, Wendell Berry, Thetis Blacker, Barbara Blackman, Z'ev Ben Shimon Halevi, Sir John Taverner, Satish Kumar, Esmé Howard and Kapila Vatsayayan. But for present purposes we can do no better than recall the words of the Bishop of London in his bidding prayer at the memorial service in her honour:

> We celebrate her gifts as a poet, who sang of loss and exile, but in her song gave us glimpses of Eden.
>
> We salute her as an inspired teacher who, in a dry and disbelieving time, taught us that the essence of the Fall was a tragic narrowing of awareness which obscured the sacramental character of created things.
>
> We rejoice in her works, her own poems and her tribute to William Blake. We give thanks for the foundation of the Temenos Academy, to be a sanctuary for ancient wisdom.
>
> We remember Blake's words, that we are put upon this earth a little space to learn 'to bear the beams of love' and with pride and gratitude we ascribe to Kathleen, the Seer's own epitaph, 'That in time of trouble I kept the divine vision'.[24]

Photo by Pamela Chandler, 1971

Principal Sources

For Raine's autobiographical writings see the trilogy *Farewell Happy Fields* (1974), *The Land Unknown* (1975), *The Lion's Mouth* (1977), and the stand-alone *India Seen Afar* (1990). (There is also a biography which I have not seen: Philippa Bernard, *No End to Snowdrops: A Biography of Kathleen Raine*, 2010.) A comprehensive collection of her poetry, which she edited with Brian Keeble, can be found in *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine* (Cambridge: Golgonooza Press, 2019). Some of her most important scholarly work can largely be found in *Blake and Tradition*, 2 volumes (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969), *Defending Ancient Springs* (Cambridge: Golgonooza Press, 1985) and a posthumous compilation edited by Brian Keeble, *The Underlying Order and other essays* (London: Temenos Academy, 2008). For a collection of essays about and tributes to Raine see *Lighting a Candle: Kathleen Raine and Temenos*, Temenos Academy Papers 25 (London: Temenos Academy, 2008). (The editors of this compilation are identified only as J.C. and S.O.; the former is probably John Carey.)

Photo by Rollie McKenna, 1951.

1 Janet Watts, Obituary, *The Guardian*, 8th July, 2003 (on-line).

2 Kathleen Raine, *Farewell Happy Fields*, 1973 (italics mine).

3 Kathleen Raine, Inaugural Address to the Temenos Academy, 14th September, 1991, (hereafter *Temenos Address*) in *Lighting a Candle: Kathleen Raine and Temenos*, 158-159.

4 Grevel Lindrop, 'T.S. Eliot and Kathleen Raine: Two Contemplative Poets', *Temenos Academy Review* 20, 2017, 124.

5 The Prince of Wales cited Shelley's dictum in his eulogy at a memorial service for Kathleen Raine, reproduced in *Lighting a Candle: Kathleen Raine and Temenos,* 6.

[6] From Raine's review of Edwin Muir's *The Estate of Poetry* in *Comment*, January 1963. Raine believed, unfashionably, that Muir (1887-1959) was the foremost poet of his generation.

[7] William Empson published her poems in *Experiment.* Raine surmised that he had done so because he found her pretty. Who knows?

[8] For a brief account of her relationship with Maxwell, see Lyndsey Jenkins, '"But why this here and now only when I loved I knew": Remembering Kathleen Raine', June 14, 2022; womenshistorynetwork.org.

[9] 'Waste Land, Holy Land', *The Warton Lecture on English Poetry*, 1976, 387; British Academy website.

[10] The autobiographical volumes are *Farewell Happy Fields* (1974), *The Land Unknown*, (1975), *The Lion's Mouth* (1977), and a stand-alone book, *India Seen Afar* (1990). These met with a good deal of critical flak. Ray Monk, for instance, derided them in the *Times Literary Supplement* as being riddled with 'transcendental twaddle'. For a short account of Raine's views about the significance of the traditions of the sub-continent see her lecture 'India and the Modern World' (New Delhi, 1989) in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity*, edited Harry Oldmeadow, World Wisdom, 2005, 45-51.

[11] *Temenos Address*, 164.

[12] Obituary, *The Scotsman*, 17th July, 2003 (on-line).

[13] Brian Keeble, "Kathleen Raine (1908-2003)", *Sacred Web* (on-line).

[14] *Temenos Address*, 165.

[15] Temenos Academy website.

[16] The Prince's Eulogy can be found in *Lighting a Candle*, 1-7.

[17] See Philip Sherrard, 'Kathleen Raine and the Symbolic Imagination', *Temenos Academy Review* 11, 2008, 180-208 (The article was written in 1989 and was certainly read by Raine but not published until 2008. See editorial comments preceding the article.) See also Jack Herbert, 'Philip Sherrard on "Kathleen Raine and The Symbolic Art": Some Reactions and Thoughts', *Temenos Academy Review* 12, 2009, 238-247.

[18] Kathleen Raine, *Philip Sherrard: A Tribute*, 1996. (This 20-page piece was available on Amazon – for no more than $102! – but is now apparently out of print.)

[19] temenosacademy.org/kathleen-raine/

[20] Wendell Berry in *Lighting a Candle*, 26.

[21] Raine quoted in Huston Smith, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind*, 1982, 82.

[22] Grevel Lindrop, 'T.S. Eliot and Kathleen Raine', 131.

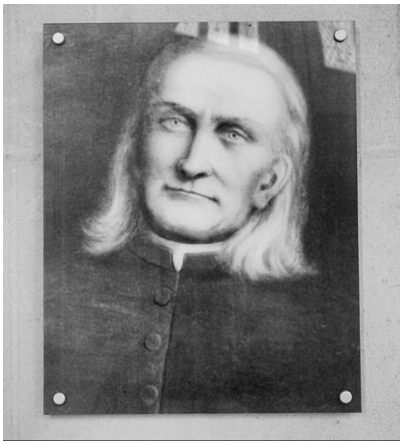
[23] Brian Keeble, 'Kathleen Raine (1908-2003)', *Sacred Web* 12 (on-line)

[24] The bishop's prayer is reproduced in *Lighting a Candle*, 217.

HENRY BACKHAUS

1811-1882

An enterprising priest



We have succeeded in living such useful lives, that of our existence in Bendigo, imperishable memorials will remain.[1]

The Rev. Dr. Henry Backhaus was one of those individuals of prodigious energy who seemed to abound in the 19th century. In the German context, from whence came Backhaus, we might think of figures like Max Müller, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, to choose three horses of very different colours. Not without reason did one scholar entitle his biography, *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*. Backhaus spent more than half of his adult life in the service of the Catholic Church in the Bendigo region of central Victoria, and his contribution to the construction of the Sacred Heart Cathedral leaves not only the Church but the wider community permanently in his debt. As one scholar tersely remarked, 'No Backhaus, no cathedral'.

Heinrich Backhaus[2] was born in 1811 in Paderborn, a regional town in Germany's north where Charlemagne established a bishopric in 795. The first cathedral of Paderborn was completed early in the 9th century as a basilica in a late-Romanesque style, dedicated to St. Mary and St. Kilian. It was partially destroyed by fire in 1000 and eventually reconstructed in a Gothic style around 1100. It was

appropriate that Backhaus was born and raised in such a place. His father was a shoe-maker and the boy was one of nine children (four from a previous marriage), in a devout family of humble means. Heinrich distinguished himself at school in both his academic studies, including English in which he became fluent, and his musical training. He spent a year at the University of Warzburg before studying for the priesthood in Rome where he was ordained in 1836. His graduation report from the College of Propaganda Fide, paraphrased by his biographer, states that 'he was very gifted, had studied well, was fervent, virtuous and careful in his observance of the rules, and that, as a prefect, had been outstanding in his care for the younger students'.[3] Early evidence of his physical strength and energy lies in the fact that he seems to have walked from Paderborn to Rome to take up his studies there, a journey which entailed a distance of over 1000 kilometres and the traversal of the Alps. He repeated it twice, once in the company of his younger brother Everard.

The first decade of Backhaus' priesthood was spent in missionizing work in India and included two visits to England and Ireland, in part to recruit nuns to work on the Bengali mission field. His strength of will and powers of persuasion were displayed in his encounter with the redoubtable Superioress of the Abbey of Loreto in Rathfarnham, altogether implacable in her denial of his request. Yet eventually, after a protracted tussle, Backhaus prevailed, now having permission to address the whole community which he did so eloquently that *all* of the nuns volunteered for service in India! In the event he returned to Bengal with no less than twelve, 'an apostolic number' as he observed in a letter recounting his triumph.[4] Backhaus retained a lifelong fondness for the Irish, evident in a speech he gave in Bendigo a few years after his arrival on the goldfields. Addressing the St Patrick's Benefit Society he remarked,

> Although I am a stranger to most of you by way of having been born in a different country, I am of the same opinion as the old Irish woman who said of someone else, 'If he was born in a different country, it was a mistake, for he should have been born in it'. There is a clannishness about the Irish, but there is also great kind-heartedness … Though I am not an Irishman, it so happened that I have been mixed up with more than those of my own country and I thank the Lord that he has shown me such good company. … I always met with a warm-

> hearted reception which was totally unexpected by such a cold German as myself[5]

Floods, famine, disease, a harsh climate and some trouble with his superiors made for a hard but productive life in India before Backhaus, probably because of ill health, determined to visit Australia.

Backhaus landed in Adelaide in October 1846, drawn thither by the growing number of German migrants and the opening up of new ecclesiastical fields in the hinterlands. But finding that the Bishop was away in Europe he travelled on to Sydney where he spent almost a year, taking charge of the Cathedral Choir. 'His forte was music. Not only was he blessed with a fine, rich singing voice, he had a profound knowledge of music, a love for the liturgy, and had himself produced several very creditable compositions of church music.'[6] Late in 1847 he returned to South Australia where he worked closely with Bishop Francis Murphy. Soon after his arrival in Adelaide Backhaus delivered a sermon on which a contemporary reported thus:

> His beautiful profusion of imagery; his gorgeous description; his oriental fertility and lavish magnificence of expression; his energy of appeal and tenderness of pathos immediately arrested and riveted every faculty of the imagination, while the full, clear and commanding compass of the Rev. Doctor's voice gave him every opportunity to flourish his splendid perorations with the utmost effect… [7]

After this ostensible panegyric the reporter, apparently a Protestant sober-sides, went on to deplore the extravagant theatricality of Backhaus' manner, complaining that 'Such overwrought imitation of Demosthenes may do very well among phlegmatic Germans… or the fidgety French'. During his time in Adelaide Backhaus initiated what was to become a lifelong series of speculative investments in land – almost invariably successful! He eventually earned the sobriquet 'Rev. Corner Allotments'. To become a landowner Backhaus needed to apply for British citizenship, eventually granted in 1850 after a slow grinding of the bureaucratic wheels.

Straitened times in South Australia and a revenue drought in the Church prompted Backhaus to return to Melbourne to offer his services on the Victorian goldfields. A mere five days after his appointment, he undertook a horse-back journey from Melbourne to

Mt Alexander, sharing the primitive and hazardous track with all manner of men in the grip of gold fever. His first biographer:

> Could he have known that this extraordinary journey was the turning-point of his life; that all that had gone before was a preparation; that in this raw and rugged land, amongst these rough and rugged men, lay his destiny; that this was not just the beginning of another episode, but the beginning of the longest, the most important, the most fruitful period of his life; that here he was to make history; that here he would be remembered long after he was dead?[8]

On his way to Mt Alexander Backhaus conducted four baptisms in Kyneton and celebrated Mass under canvas at the Forest Creek diggings (now Castlemaine) in late April 1852, the first Mass in the Sandhurst region following a week later. Initially Backhaus based himself at Mt Alexander, the administrative centre of the goldfields, but the appointment of a priest to Kyneton allowed him to focus his work on Sandhurst. *The Advocate* later painted the scene at Backhaus' early celebrations of Mass at Bendigo Creek:

> As it was impossible for the miners, scattered as they were along the low range of hills that skirted the Bendigo Creek to assemble at one place, Fr. Backhaus had recourse to a strange device, to enable them to be present, in spirit at least, at Holy Mass, in the calico tent which served as the first church on the goldfields. A pole was fixed in front of it, and on Sundays, when Holy Mass was to be celebrated, a white flag was unfurled from the top of the pole. Then would congregate in the tent and around it as many as could find room, but most of the Catholic miners took their place around their respective tents within sight of the church. The commencement of Holy Mass was indicated by opening the front of the tent and lowering the signal flag. All then knelt down under the open sky and united with the priest in offering up the Holy Sacrifice. At the elevation the flag was again raised and the end of the Mass notified in the same manner.[9]

Apart from a five-year interval (1863-1868) when he returned to Europe, Backhaus was to spend the rest of his working life in Sandhurst, later to become known as Bendigo.[10] After a few months

on the move Backhaus pitched his tent on a shrewdly chosen permanent site where he soon supervised the building of a slab-walled chapel with a canvas roof, followed soon after by a school. It became the location of St Kilian's Church, built over a troublesome five-year period (1858-1863) and dedicated to the early Irish missionary to Germany, one of the patron saints of Paderborn, the place of Backhaus' nativity. In a report to Rome Backhaus stated that during these years he lived 'like a Rechabite, in the open air'.[11]

One scholar furnishes us with a lively sketch of Backhaus in these early years on the Bendigo goldfields:

> Tall and ascetic looking, he was the complete example of the educated man who chose to share the hardships of the early gold diggers so that he could best minister to their wants. Frugal in his own requirements, he constantly carried out surreptitious acts of charity. He had the rare distinction of being esteemed by the poor as well as the rich, by his own parishioners and by members of other denominations. Forthright and of an independent spirit, he combined a confidence in his own judgment with a ready obedience to ecclesiastical authority.[12]

The English traveller and writer William Howitt dined with Backhaus in Bendigo in 1853, describing him as 'a man of great liberality and learning …. [who] has seen a great deal of the world, enough in fact, to make him a man of the world, and not a bigot'.[13] His learning was indeed extensive, encompassing not only theology but different languages, history, science, and comparative religion. His attitude to people of other races and other faiths also confirmed Howitt's judgment. He several times came to the defence of Chinese miners who had flocked to the Victorian goldfields. He was, by all accounts, a highly skilful peace-maker, often intervening in the street fights and domestic skirmishes which occurred frequently in the settlement. As to the diggers at large, 'while he lambasted them for their drinking and their rowdiness, he sympathized with them in their grievances'.[14]

Life as a priest on the goldfields was not without many challenges, but Backhaus soon established himself as a leading light in Sandhurst as well as a priest who carried out his duties tirelessly. By the time of his (first) resignation in 1863 Backhaus had conducted nearly all of the 4413 Catholic baptisms, 749 marriages and 1014 funerals which had taken place in the previous decade.[15]

Backhaus was also much in demand for his medical knowledge and expertise, his ability to heal bodies as well as souls, sometimes through the use of homeopathy. He also had an shrewd knack for fund-raising not only for the Church but for other worthy causes. He involved himself in many aspects of the cultural and municipal life of the burgeoning regional city, playing a leading role in the establishment and administration of a hospital, the Benevolent Asylum and the Mechanics Institute, and belonging to bodies such as the Committee for Water Supply and, later, for the Melbourne to Murray Railway. He composed music and was active in the musical life of the Church and of the wider community. He enjoyed a glass of wine and patronized the local vignerons. Visiting a local vineyard he was invited to sample several varieties during which he remarked to his friend the Police Magistrate, Lachlan McLachlan, 'If I don't stop this I'll be appearing before you next Monday morning' to which 'Big Mac' replied, 'If I don't stop I'll be kneeling before you next Saturday night'.[16] Backhaus' interests extended to agriculture, geology and dendrology – the study of woody plants and trees and their taxonomic classification; he despatched specimens of slate and ironbark to exhibitions in Melbourne and London. All the while, guided by his uncanny business sense, he went on accumulating properties in the region, writing that he did so 'for the sake of Catholics in Sandhurst' and to 'further the interests of religion in this quarter and encourage a permanent settlement of Catholics in all these vicinities'.[17]

Backhaus was no stranger to either conflict or controversy, the latter often stemming from the former. The disputes in which he found himself entangled were of several kinds but usually involved friction with ecclesiastical authorities, or with contractors whom Backhaus had commissioned in his many building projects, or with critics of his ever-increasing land holdings, investments and business dealings. We have already noted that he was a man confident in his own abilities and judgments; he could be also be quite intractable and irascible, and was not generously endowed with a sense of humour. As one of his biographers observes, 'Devotion, dedication, orthodoxy in doctrine, solid piety, charity, severity in denunciation of evil, meticulous attention to detail, determination – all these laudable qualities are there, but of humour there is little trace'.[18] Although the evidence is sketchy we might reasonably surmise that an escalating series of conflicts in the late 1850s and early 60s fuelled Backhaus'

apparently abrupt decision to resign. The catalysts included a running series of disagreements with Bishop Goold, the head of the Diocese of Melbourne. Goold made several clerical appointments to Sandhurst because of the ever-increasing demands of a rapidly growing population. Backhaus resisted all such appointments on various grounds, mostly spurious, but at bottom he seems to have spurned the idea that he needed any kind of assistance at all. He was used to running things his own way.[19] The Bishop's insistence in this matter triggered Backhaus' letter of 'irrevocable resignation' in June 1863. In his letter Backhaus signalled his intention of 'not only quitting Victoria but these parts of the world'.[20]

Another factor which may have played a part in Backhaus' resignation was the decision of the Synod of Australian Bishops, in late 1862, to introduce regulations concerning the accumulation of money and property by priests. The new regulations deemed it 'unseemly in a missionary priest to be a holder of mortgages, the receiver of house rents, the proprietor of landed property' as such involvements might endanger 'the sacredness of his character' and would be 'likely to interfere with the conscientious discharge of his duties'.[21] This left Backhaus in an invidious position. There is no evidence to suggest that Backhaus' holdings compromised his work as a priest but conformity with the regulations would certainly undermine his highly-prized financial independence. As previously intimated, Backhaus was never intent on accumulating wealth for himself – his lifestyle remained modest and frugal throughout – but rather to fund his various church projects and to engage in 'surreptitious acts of charity'. As his obituary in the *Argus* noted, 'Though he amassed so much property, it must not be understood that he was unconscious of his duties to the poorer members of his flock, whilst frequent acts of charity to those outside his own connexion were recorded.'[22]

After several florid farewell ceremonies in Bendigo, Backhaus sailed out of Melbourne in late October, launching a journey that would take him to South America, the Caribbean, the U.S.A. and Canada, eventually landing him back in his native Paderborn where he lived for about two years during which time he also visited France, Italy, Palestine and Egypt. Though he had severed his formal connection with Bendigo his emotional and spiritual ties remained. While in France he ordered a set of church plate for St. Kilian's Church. In late 1865 he refused an appointment in Paderborn and

resolved to return to Australia even before he received a conciliatory letter from Bishop Goold inquiring 'when will you come back to us?' and assuring him that 'a hearty welcome will greet your return'.[23] Backhaus arrived back in Melbourne in February 1866, and worked for a time in Melbourne and its outlying districts as well as spending some time in Adelaide. By early May he was back in harness at Sandhurst.

The Reverend Doctor resumed the busy life of the earlier years, active in municipal affairs, supervising all manner of church initiatives, pursuing his personal interests in science and agriculture, rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous as well as ministering to the needs of the poor.[24] He also continued to acquire more properties, thanks to the generous contributions of his flock. At the time of his final retirement to Brighton in 1881 the town dignitaries presented him with an illuminated address which included the following passage:

> We will miss your kindly sympathy and great anxiety in all our misfortunes, your genial smile and timely word of encouragement, your zeal in the cause of religion, your charity, not only towards our Public Institutions, but more especially to the poor.[25]

We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of these sentiments which were echoed in various other tributes paid to Backhaus. A faithful servant of Christ, a champion of the Church and a powerhouse in the development of Bendigo, Backhaus died on 7th September, 1882. A few days before his death, sensing that his end was near, Backhaus insisted on being taken, by train, from Melbourne back to Sandhurst where he passed away three days later in the home of his friend John Crowley. He was buried in the churchyard of St Kilian's. His funeral was conducted with great pomp and ceremony in grand Victorian style, and described in the press as the largest gathering that had ever taken place in Bendigo.[26] The funeral procession alone was estimated to number 10,000 while thousands more lined the streets to watch it. Backhaus' legacy, crowned by the Sacred Heart Cathedral, was not to come to full fruition for some years.

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In the fullness of time the construction of the Sacred Heart Cathedral, a massive and expensive operation spanning an eighty-year period, was entirely funded by the Backhaus estate. Our present purpose is not served by any attempt to unravel the tangled skein of sometimes Machiavellian manoeuvres, conflicting interests and controversies in which the Backhaus estate became embroiled. Nonetheless, it is worth giving an abbreviated account of the terms of Backhaus' will and the extent of the wealth which made the building of the Cathedral possible.[27]

Backhaus only made his will on the day before his death. Its terms were to lead to all sorts of legal, administrative and ethical complications in the years that followed. The will stipulated that all of Backhaus' extensive real estate holdings in both Victoria and South Australia were to be left to three trustees and their successors in perpetuity. The income from the estate was to accumulate for twenty years at which time it was to be paid to a secular priest in charge of St Kilian's Church, to be used 'for religious and useful purposes in connection with that church'. Thereafter the income was to be paid annually. Backhaus was determined to keep the administration of his estate at some distance from the Church authorities, evident in the choice of the first three trustees, only one of whom, William Tierney of Beechworth, was a priest (and not part of the Sandhurst hierarchy), the other two being John Crowley, hotel-keeper, and Arthur Magee, timber merchant.

At the time of his death Backhaus' estate comprised the following: 89 allotments in central and suburban Bendigo, 48 allotments in small townships in the Bendigo hinterland, 42 farming properties, his Brighton residence and its 23 acres, as well as one city allotment in Adelaide and several in regional areas of South Australia. Quite a portfolio! The properties in Victoria were valued at roughly £60,000. When his personal estate (belongings, funds in bank accounts and the like) was added, the estate overall was worth roughly £77,000. Today's equivalent would be many millions of dollars. We can note in passing that Backhaus also left £15000 pounds to his house-keeper, Jane Halfpenny, and transferred his Melbourne residence and some 23 acres of land in Brighton to the Archbishop of Melbourne and the bishops of Sandhurst to be held in trust as a retirement home for elderly priests.

There are various ways of trying to compute equivalent value. Like much else in the 'dismal science', these methods can lead to wildly

different estimates of today's equivalent value of the Backhaus estate, ranging from about $8 to $25 million. By one idiosyncratic method based on computing the original sum as a percentage of the national GDP we arrive at a figure of $370 million![28] This figure is not altogether implausible if we note that the Cathedral is today insured for well in excess of $100 million, and remembering that not only the Cathedral but much else was, and is, funded by the Backhaus estate.[29] It might be said that the Sandhurst Diocese has been living off the back of Backhaus for well over a century – which is just as he would have wanted it! Traces of Backhaus can still be found in various parts of the city.[30] At his farewell function in 1881 he was moved to say, 'We have succeeded in living such useful lives, that of our existence in Bendigo, imperishable memorials will remain'.[31] A fitting epitaph. But we can hardly doubt that he himself would want to best be remembered for his unswerving fidelity to his vocation as a priest.

Principal Sources

The first biography is John Hussey's *Henry Backhaus D.D.* (Bendigo: St. Kilian's Press, 1982), followed by William Dobson's more critical *Cloth of Gold* (South Oakleigh: privately published, 1986; copies are held in the State and National Libraries). A digital copy of a draft manuscript is held in the Diocesan Archives. *Goldfields Shepherd: the Story of Dr Backhaus* is a short monograph by Frank Cusack (Sandhurst Diocese, 1982). M.J. Nolan's *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*, *Bendigo Pioneer* (Bendigo: privately published, 2008), is a brief but well-researched, even-handed and richly illustrated account. A.E. Owens provides an essay, 'Backhaus, George Henry (1811-1882)', in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 3, 1969. For background and historical context one might turn to Frank Cusack's lively *Bendigo: A History* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1971).

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1 From a speech given by Backhaus on the occasion of his retirement; quoted in A.E. Owens' entry on Backhaus in *Australian Dictionary of Biography.* The portrait above is located in the Sacred Heart Cathedral, Bendigo.

2 In Australia his surname came to be pronounced as in 'Bacchus' while 'Heinrich' became 'Henry'.

3 John Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, Bendigo: St. Kilian's Press, 1982, 21.

4 The whole episode is recounted in Hussey, 29-31.

5 Backhaus quoted in William T. Dobson, *Cloth of Gold*, draft ms., 61.

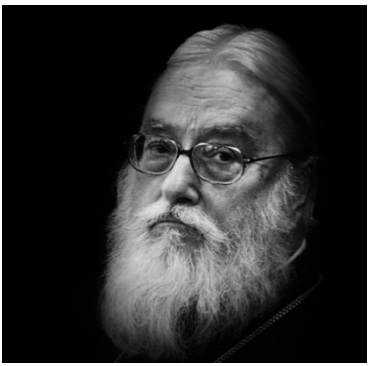
6 John Hussey, *Henry Backhaus,* 40-41.

7 *South Australian Register*, 13th November, 1847, quoted in M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*, *Bendigo Pioneer*, Bendigo: privately published, 2008, 32. Another writer called the same sermon 'very grand'.
8 John Hussey, *Henry Backhaus,* 59.
9 *The Advocate* (Melbourne), 14th September, 1901, 6.; accessed through *Trove*, search item 'Sacred Heart Cathedral Bendigo'.
10 The goldfield settlement was known as Sandhurst, becoming a Borough in 1863 and a city in 1871. It formally became the City of Bendigo in 1891.
11 M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life*, 40.
12 A.E. Owens 'Backhaus, George Henry (1811-1882)'. Given several episodes in which Backhaus crossed swords with his superiors it is perhaps rather gilding the lily to refer to his 'ready obedience to ecclesiastical authority'.
13 M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life*, 42.
14 J. Hussey, *Henry Backhaus,* 93.
15 M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life*, 62-63.
16 J. Hussey, *Henry Backhaus,* 99-100.
17 Backhaus letters to Dr. Fitzpatrick, the Vicar-General, May and August 1854, quoted in M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life,* 44.
18 J. Hussey, *Henry Backhaus,* 100.
19 See M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life,* 61.
20 On Backhaus' disputes with Bishop Goold, and his eventual resignation, see M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life,* 61-62.
21 Ibid, 62.
22 *Argus*, 8th September, 1882; reproduced in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.
23 Bishop Goold to Backhaus, 25th September, 1865, quoted in M.J. Nolan, 67.
24 It is not clear whether Backhaus simply ignored the new regulations or devised various stratagems to circumvent them. In any event his land purchases continued apace.
25 M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life*, 117.
26 See Appendix B, 'Funeral Reports' in M.J. Nolan, 130-134.
27 For a detailed account of the legal machinations surrounding the estate for several decades see William T. Dobson, *Cloth of Gold*; 237ff. See also M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life,* 87-127.
28 See M.J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life,* 127.
29 In 2010 the Sandhurst Trust was delivering an annual income stream of more than $850,000; https://henrybackhausbook.com.au.
30 One might mention the Backhaus Arcade and the Backhaus Building, both running off Mitchell St.
31 A.E. Owens in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

METROPOLITAN KALLISTOS WARE

1934-2022

the journey into eternity



We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days of the calendar, for it is a journey out of time into eternity.[1]

Timothy Ware was born in Bath in 1934 and raised in an evangelical Anglican family. At sixteen he discovered Helen Waddell's marvellous book on the Desert Fathers which he found 'instantly attractive'.[2] Soon after he found himself inside a Russian Orthodox Church (St Philip's in central London, since demolished) during the vigil service on a Saturday evening. Here too, despite the fact that the liturgy was conducted in an unknown language, he found 'an immediate attraction' and was overwhelmed by the sense that the church was full of 'invisible worshippers':

> I felt a sense of the unity between our earthly worship and the worship in Heaven. I had a vivid sense of the living reality of the communion of saints. I didn't understand anything that was said, because it was all in Slavonic. But, again … I felt an immediate attraction. … I waited six years before joining the Orthodox Church. I wouldn't say my

> mind was made up on that Saturday afternoon. But that experience gave a direction to my life, which meant I felt more and more that my 'true home' was in the Orthodox Church.[3]

Some years later he was reminded, with 'a shock of recognition', of his experience in St Philip's when reading an account of St Vladimir's attendance at the Divine Liturgy in Constantinople; he and his friends 'knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells among men'.[4]

Amongst the attractions of Orthodoxy was the sense of a uninterrupted living tradition:

> When I began to read about Orthodoxy, I was impressed by a sense of living tradition. I felt, 'Here is a church with deep roots in the past; a church that has not undergone the Scholasticism of the West and the Middle Ages, nor the fraction and breaking that took place with the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and that has not been profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment; a church that remains the church of the early martyrs of confessors, the church of the early fathers and of the ecumenical councils'.[5]

He was received into the Greek Orthodox Church in 1958. He studied classics and theology at Oxford University, attaining a double first. After spending some time in an Orthodox monastery in Canada and then the monastery of St John the Theologian in Patmos (Greece), he was ordained to the priesthood and tonsured a monk with the name Kallistos in 1966. That year he also launched a 35-year teaching career in Orthodox Studies at Oxford University where he was a Fellow of Pembroke College and also a long-serving parish priest serving both Greek and Russian congregations. In 1982, under the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, he was consecrated a bishop and elevated to the rank of metropolitan in 2007.

In 1963 Ware published his most widely-read book, *The Orthodox Church* ('still the quintessential introduction to the Orthodox Church'[6]), which he reviewed and updated many times. A more seasoned and more spiritual book, *The Orthodox Way,* largely concerned with prayer, appeared in 1979. Ware was a prolific writer and many of his works harmonize scholarship and spirituality. His

one-time student and friend, Fr John Chryssavgis, has written of 'his rare combination of the scholarly and spiritual, academia and asceticism, of patristic literature and profound liturgy – of Orthodox Christianity as a living and life-changing tradition'. Chryssavgis remembers Ware primarily as the translator, with Mother Mary of the Orthodox Monastery of the Holy Veil in France, of *The Festal Menaion* and *The Lentern Triodion*, 'the core liturgical books of the Orthodox Church', completed in 1969 and 1977.[7]

With Gerard Palmer and Philip Sherrard, Ware worked on the landmark translation of the *Philokalia*, a compilation of mystical texts, and on other traditional patristic and liturgical works. The bishop was also for many years the editor of 'the pioneering journal', *Eastern Churches Review.* Just as Philip Sherrard had spent the last months of his life working on the *Philokalia*, so too Ware was finalizing the Index for the fifth and last volume just before he crossed to the Jordan.

Asked to state his understanding of the Christian message as succinctly as possible, Ware responded:

> I believe in a God who loves humankind so intensely, so totally, that he chose himself to become human. Therefore, I believe in Jesus Christ as fully and truly God, but also totally and unreservedly one of us, fully human. And I would say to you, 'The love of God is so great that Christ died for us on the cross. But love is stronger than death, and so the death of Jesus was followed by his resurrection.' I am a Christian because I believe in the great love of God that led him to become incarnate, to die, and to rise again. That's my faith. All of this is made immediate to us through the continuing action of the Holy Spirit.[8]

Metropolitan Kallistos was an inspired preacher, an engaging lecturer and dedicated teacher, a prolific writer, a revered spiritual director. He was deeply involved in Christian ecumenism, especially Anglican-Orthodox. Discussing his commitment to ecumenism he recalled the early Christian saying *unus Christianus, nullus Christianus* ('one Christian, no Christian'), explaining that

> No one can be genuinely Christian in isolation. We are saved, not alone, but as members of the Body of Christ, in union with all other members. For me therefore, as a

> Christian, it is vitally important that I should seek to meet other Christians, to understand them and to work with them… .[9]

He was a courteous, lucid and witty participant in all manner of dialogues, interviews, seminars and the like. He travelled several times to the USA where he was well-known in academic and Orthodox circles, especially within the orbit of St Vladimir's Seminary in New York. In his later years the bishop didn't flinch from engagement with volatile controversies about the ordination of women, the Church's teaching on homosexuality and the unhappy developments in Orthodoxy triggered by the Ukraine-Russian war. He also critiqued 'the ethnic narrowness and intolerance of Orthodoxy' which often betrayed its true nature.

Chryssavgis affords us some glimpses of Ware's personality, character and outlook:

> He was a punctilious and measured man… Comfortable serving as a priest at Holy Trinity Church as he was researching in the Bodleian Library and chairing the faculty of theology, he spent countless hours visiting patients in hospitals and parishioners in restaurants or businesses. He was as much on fire delivering a lecture on the desert fathers or the Palamite controversy as he was delivering a sermon… all with a distinctive and ingenious wit… Thoroughly ecumenical, he was an English gentleman through and through. Orthodox to the bone, he nevertheless considered himself a perennial apprentice of the faith, once stating how he looked forward to browsing through heaven's library. He never imagined himself contorting the Orthodox faith to personal conventions or apprehensions, but ever perceived himself as willing to be shaped, perhaps surprised by its newness… He emphasised the struggle to espouse the heart of the Orthodox faith as well as to embrace its paradoxes, antitheses and polarities.[10]

Another acquaintance described him as 'genuinely good and caring, humorous (and frequently enjoying his own humor), intellectually curious, and strong in his faith and commitment to Orthodoxy while thoughtful and open-minded as he pondered the

distinctions between Tradition and traditions in the face of our broader society'.[11]

In 2003 St Vladimir's Seminary Press published *Abba, The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West; Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia* in which we find articles encompassing many of Ware's abiding interests.[12] In 2017 the Archbishop of Canterbury awarded him the Lambeth Cross for Ecumenism 'for his outstanding contribution to Anglican-Orthodox theological dialogue'. Along with Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (1914-2003),[13] he had become the best-known and most influential Orthodox theologian in the English-speaking world. After a serious illness Metropolitan Kallistos departed this life in 2022, aged 87. His death occasioned many fervent tributes from people from differing Christian traditions. As Maria Gywn McDowell, an American Episcopalian priest wrote, 'A gracious, thoughtful, articulate spokesman for the best of Orthodoxy to an English-speaking audience has died.'[14]

Rather than essaying any summation of his work, here I want only to highlight three recurrent themes in the bishop's life and thought which seem to me particularly fruitful, signposted by three resonant (and inexhaustible) terms: 'mystery', 'theophany', 'tradition' – a subjective and somewhat arbitrary selection; one might just as profitably focus on Ware's explorations of 'faith', 'worship' or 'prayer', subjects on which he has ruminated and wisely written throughout his long Christian journey.

The Christian Mystery

> We see that it is not the task of Christianity [Ware writes] to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.

How much spilling of blood, both figuratively and literally, might have been avoided if Christian theologians and ecclesiastical authorities had cleaved to this principle, one which has been repeatedly affirmed throughout the ages but all too often not sufficiently heeded. Here is Simone Weil on the same subject: 'The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation.'[15] In similar vein, Karen Armstrong: 'A theology should be like poetry,

which takes us to the end of what words and thoughts can do.'[16] Ware again:

> In the Christian context, we do not mean by a 'mystery' merely that which is baffling and mysterious, an enigma or insoluble problem. A mystery is, on the contrary, something that is *revealed for our understanding*, but which we never understand exhaustively because it leads into the depth or the darkness of God. The eyes are closed – but they are also opened.

Ware explains that we cannot understand God's 'inner being' or 'essence' because to do so would be know God 'in the same way as he knows himself' which is not possible since there is a gulf between the Creator and the Created. Here Ware is actually contradicting the testimony of the mystics and ignoring St Iranenus' dictum to which he himself actually refers elsewhere the same volume: 'God became man that man might become God'. In the same vein Ware states that

> God's Incarnation opens the way to man's deification. To be deified is, more specifically, to be 'christified': the divine likeness that we are called to attain is the likeness of Christ. It is through Jesus the God-man that we men are 'ingodded', 'divinized', made 'sharers in the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4).

Be that as it may, the incommensurability of 'God' and 'man' means that for all but the fully realized saint-mystic, God remains a mystery – but, paradoxically, a *'revealed'* mystery, both in the person of Christ and in the cosmic theophany whereby we come to know the divine 'energies, grace, life and power [which] fill the whole universe, and are directly accessible to us'.

The Cosmic Theophany

The Psalmist affirmed that 'The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament sheweth his handiwork' (Psalms 19.1), a theme which resounds through the Christian tradition. As Hildegard of Bingen put it, 'There is the music of Heaven in all things'. In his writings Ware often articulates the same idea, seeing the whole universe as a cosmic theophany, a revelation of the 'divine energies, grace, life and power', each part not only 'standing out in all the brilliance of its specific being' but also 'transparent' so that in all created things and beings

we may discern the Creator; to contemplate nature, to see with spiritual vision, is to see God everywhere. 'God is *above and beyond* all things, yet as Creator he is also *within* all things –panentheism, not pantheism.' Here Ware is rehearsing an idea to be found not only in the Abrahamic traditions but through the ages throughout the world. The Lakota holy man, Black Elk, was expressing precisely the same idea as the Orthodox bishop when he stated that

> We should understand well that all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains and all the four-legged animals, and the winged peoples; and even more importantly, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples. When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will fear, and love, and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as the Spirit intends.[17]

Ware gives the principle a particular Christian inflection in seeing Christ (as Logos) as the divine unifier:

> He is the principle of order and purpose that permeates all things, drawing them to unity in God, and so making the universe into a 'cosmos', a harmonious and integrated whole. The Creator-Logos has imparted to each created thing its own indwelling logos or inner principle, which makes that thing to be distinctively itself, and which at the same time draws and directs that thing towards God.

The Living Tradition

As intimated earlier, one of the attractions of Orthodoxy for Ware was a 'vibrant and vivifying conception of Tradition' the strong sense of 'a *living* and *unbroken continuity* with the Church of the Apostles and Martyrs, of the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils'.[18] Here just two points about 'tradition': a proper understanding of the term includes the notion that far from being a fossilized deposit from the past, any religious tradition properly so-called is, in Ware's words,

> not static but dynamic, not defensive but exploratory, not closed and backward facing but open to the future… The only true Tradition is living and creative, formed from the union of human freedom with the grace of the Spirit'.[19]

In Vladimir Lossky's words, 'Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church'. Ware's understanding of 'tradition' was, by his own account, much influenced by two of the greatest Orthodox theologians of recent times, Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958). Mention may also be made of Aleksei Khomiakov (1804-1860) to whom Ware also often referred. (Younger folk might protest that these figures are not 'recent' but indeed they are if we are thinking in traditional terms!) Ware's thinking and writing is everywhere saturated with familiar references to the Orthodox tradition; he is on intimate and friendly terms, so to speak, not only with the Scriptures but with the Fathers, the mystics and saints, the great theologians and philosophers, with the rich liturgical heritage, indeed with pretty well all aspects of the tradition. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has so well put it,

> Tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science and the arts.[20]

Ware has immersed himself in all these aspects of 'tradition'. No doubt he would have endorsed Lord Northbourne's claim that 'tradition is the chain that joins civilisation to Revelation'.[21] The 'unbroken continuity' to which Ware refers is vouchsafed by the principle from which the Eastern Church takes its name, that of orthodoxy, usefully defined by Frithjof Schuon as 'the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual perspective'.[22]

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In ancient Greek 'Kallistos' means something like 'the most beautiful' or 'the best', a name Timothy Ware assumed at his monastic tonsure and priestly ordination. How apposite the name was. In one of his many interviews the bishop asserted that 'Tradition lives on. The age of the fathers didn't stop in the fifth or seventh century. We could have holy fathers now…'.[23] He would certainly not have made any such claim for himself but he was one such.

Principal Sources

Metropolitan Kallistos wrote a number of scholarly books and articles about many aspects of Orthodoxy, some of them quite arcane, but *The Orthodox Way* (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1979) comprises the quintessence of his teaching while *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, 1963) remains a go-to work on the tradition as a whole. *Strange Yet Familiar: My Journey*, published on-line in three parts by the journal *Journey to Orthodoxy*, gives an account of his conversion to Orthodoxy. Presently only one of a projected six volumes of Ware's collected works has been published: *The Inner Kingdom: Volume 1 of the Collected Works* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary, 2000). Various interviews, lectures and obituaries can be easily ferreted out online.

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1 All quotes from Ware, unless otherwise indicated, come from *The Orthodox Way*, Mowbray, 1979.

2 Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, first published 1936.

3 Ware's conversion to Orthodoxy is described in *Strange but Familiar: My Journey* published on-line in three parts by the journal *Journey to Orthodoxy*. The first part (with links to Parts 2 & 3) can be found at: journeytoorthodoxy.com/2010/07/strange-yet-familiar-my-journey-to-orthodoxy-part-1. There are several different versions to be found on line. The excerpt above – hereafter referred to as *Strange Yet Familiar* – comes not from *Journey to Orthodoxy* site but from the Seattle Pacific University site: stories.spu.edu, further citations from which will signalled by *My Journey*.

4 *Strange but Familiar* Pt 1.
5 *My Journey*.
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Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi

1869-1934

'leading souls to the kingdom of the Most High'

Remembrance is the mightiest rule of the religion…

In 1932 Frithjof Schuon, at that time a young fabric designer in Paris but destined to become the foremost metaphysician and religious philosopher of the century, left all behind to search for a spiritual teacher in North Africa. He found the Sufi master Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi in Mostaganem, the port city on the Mediterranean coast of Algeria, later evoked in one of Schuon's poems:

The town of Mostaganem: dark blue sea,
A golden land with palm trees – and the mosque;
A few white houses. Pious people clad in white.
Then yellow sand, as far as the eye can see.

The dervish brothers, who look toward the inward;
The holy Shaykh, to whom I had been brought.
Static dances and long litanies –
Radiant days; clear, star-filled nights.[1]

Schuon soon entered the fold of Islam and was initiated into the Sufi order which the master had founded. It was only after he had already met the Shaykh that Schuon belatedly received a letter from René Guénon whom he had asked to recommend a Sufi teacher; we are not surprised to find that Guénon had identified none other than Ahmad

al-Alawi.[2] Political machinations by the French colonial authorities only allowed Schuon to stay in Mostaganem for four months but the course of his life had been unalterably changed.[3] The Shaykh passed from this life not long after, occasioning a piece in *Cahiers du Sud* in which Schuon paid homage to his revered teacher.[4] An excerpt:

> The idea which is the secret essence of each religious form, making each what it is by the action of its inward presence, is too subtle and too deep to be personified with equal intensity by all those who breathe its atmosphere. So much the greater good fortune is it to come into contact with a true spiritual representative of one of those forms (worlds which the modern West fails to understand), to come into contact with someone who represents in himself, and not merely because he happens to belong to a particular civilisation, the idea which has been the life-blood of that civilisation. To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-twentieth century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic patriarch, and this was precisely the impression made on me by the Shaykh…[5]

In the same vein the eminent scholar of Sufism, A.J. Arberry, declared that al-Alawi's 'erudition and saintliness recalled the golden age of medieval mystics'.[6] In the fullness of time it was to be Martin Lings, himself a Sufi master and a close associate of Frithjof Schuon, who was to provide us with an invaluable account of the Shaykhs's life and teaching in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* one of the great spiritual documents of our time. Lings dedicated the book to 'Shaykh Isa Nur Ad-Din', as Schuon had been named by the al-Alawi and by which time he had become a spiritual master himself.[7]

The excerpt from Schuon raises a problem for a compilation of biographical and anecdotal sketches. Given the weight and authority of Schuon's declaration, surely our concern should be more or less exclusively directed to the question of how the Shaykh embodied or personified 'the idea which has been the life-blood' of the Islamic tradition as a whole and of Sufism in particular. Yes, quite so! But that task has already been accomplished by Martin Lings. I cannot too strongly commend Lings' book to anyone with even a vague interest in its subject. What follows here serves as no more than a modest point of entry, drawing heavily on Lings' luminous book. We might recall that *Persons of Interest* opened with vignettes of three figures

who, despite the intrusions of modernity, still belonged to a traditional world and who were each 'true spiritual representatives' of a particular religious form, that of Hindu India. It is fitting that we should conclude the present enterprise closer to home and through a figure who exemplifies the best in the traditions of Abrahamic monotheism.

The outer facts of the life of Abu al-Abbas Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafa ibn Aliwa can be baldly stated. His mother dreamed that the Prophet handed her a flower which she took to signify a pious son. So it transpired. Al-Alawi was born in Mostaganem in 1869,[8] had two sisters, was educated at home by his father, worked as a cobbler and then as a shop-keeper. Here is an extract from his own recollections of his early life:

> As to learning how to write, I never made much effort in that direction, and I never went to school, not even for a single day. My only schooling was what I learned from my father at home during the *Quran* lessons which he used to give me, and my handwriting is still not proficient. My learning by heart the Book of God went as far as the *Surat ar-Rahman*, and there I came to a standstill owing to the various occupations which I was forced to turn to through sheer necessity. The family had not enough to live on – although you would never have thought it, for my father was proud and reserved to the point of never showing on his face what was in his mind… I hesitated between several different crafts, and finally took to cobbling and became quite good at it, and our situation improved in consequence. I remained a cobbler for a few years, and then went into trade, and I lost my father when I was just sixteen. Although I was so young I had been doing all sorts of things for him and I was bent on nothing so much as giving him pleasure. He was exceedingly fond of me, and I do not remember him ever blaming me for anything or beating me, except when he was giving me lessons, and then it was because I was lazy in learning the *Quran*. As to my mother, she was even more lavish in her affection… [9]

From a young age the boy was deeply religious and thirsty for theological learning. Of his early adulthood he tells us,

> I was very much addicted to learning, and would sometimes steep myself in books the whole night long;

> and I was helped in these nocturnal studies by a shaykh whom I used to bring back to our house. After this had been going on for several months, my wife took offence and claimed divorce from me on the grounds of my not giving her rights, and she had in fact some cause to complain.[10]

For a time he devoted himself to developing wonder-working 'magical powers', including the arts of snake-charming and fire-eating but these preoccupations were soon to fall away.

> On the day when God willed that I should be inspired with the truth, we were at one of our gatherings and I looked up and saw a paper that was on one of the walls of the house we were in, and my eye lit on a saying that was traced back to the Prophet. What I learned from it caused me to give up what I had been doing in the way of working wonders, and I determined to limit myself in that order to the litanies and invocations and recitations of the *Quran*.[11]

In 1894 he travelled to Morocco and came under the sway of Shaykh Muhammad al-Buzidi by whom he was initiated into the Darqawiyyah order of Sufism and through whose *barakah* (or *darsan,* to borrow an apposite Hindu term) he underwent spiritual enlightenment:

> Once this state has been realised [he later said], all the lights of Infinite Life may penetrate the soul of the Sufi, and make him participate in the Divine Life, so that he has a right to exclaim: I am Allah… There is no longer any need to believe, when one sees the Truth.[12]

Following the death of his Master, who had not nominated a successor, al-Alawi was elected to the succession but he resisted, later explaining that spiritual attainment is best followed by obscurity so that the roots may be firm and deep; only then, he said, could one 'bring forth in fullness'.

After fifteen years in Morocco he journeyed through Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli to Istanbul before returning to Mostaganem. Later he travelled to Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and Damascus. After a vision in which he was visited by Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet), al-Alawi founded a new branch of the Shadhiliyyah-Darqwiyyah order, the Alawiyya. By the early 1920s he was reputed to have gathered

something in the order of 100,000 disciples, perhaps double that number by the time of his death, the order now having established centres not only in its Moroccan stronghold but throughout North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Europe, most notably perhaps in France where, in 1926, the Shaykh participated in the opening of the first mosque in Paris.

The recurrent theme in the Shaykh's teaching was the importance of *dhikr* (remembrance) which the *Quran* itself extols above all other observances and which the Shaykh insisted was the very reason for the existence of 'every rite and every practice'.[13] *Dhikr* brings the devotee to direct knowledge of God through contemplation and Invocation, the recitation of the Divine Name. From one of the Shaykh's treatises: 'Remembrance (*dhikr*) is the most important rule of the religion. The law was not imposed on us nor the rites of worship ordained except for the sake establishing the remembrance of God.'[14] In keeping with the implacable monotheism of Islam and the Sufi accent on mystical gnosis, al-Alawi frequently resorted to Quranic verses such as 'He is the first and the last and the inner and the outer and He is the knower of all things', and 'All things perish except His face', as well as formulating his own non-dualistic (one might almost say '*advaitin*') maxims for his followers, such as 'He that hath realized the Truth of Infinite Plenitude findeth no room for otherness' and 'It is not a question of knowing God when the veil be lifted but of knowing Him in the veil itself'. On a more quotidian level he taught his followers 'to live simply, in abstinence and prayer, to practice alms, to avoid the society of the powerful, to be humble in word and dress', to practice charity and participate in the 'loving fraternity' which binds together not only humans but all living beings.[15]

There are other interesting aspects of al-Alawi's life and teaching which cannot be canvassed here: his attempts both to defy the encroachments of modernity and to adapt traditional practices to contemporary conditions; his resistance to French colonialism and the adoption of European habits; his journalistic work on two religious newspapers which he published for some years; the controversies occasioned by the publication of some of the Shaykh's poems which his opponents claimed disrespected the Prophet; his sympathetic attitude to Christianity (which didn't preclude sharp criticism of Christian missionaries in Algeria); his critiques of both

secularism and religious fundamentalism; his affirmation of the *sophia perennis*.

What can we say of the Shaykh as a person? Here is a pedestrian description of the Shaykh's appearance and demeanour:

> He was of tall stature and very slim. He skin was olive-coloured, with a hint of red. His beard was silvery white. He had a long slender nose and his cheeks were sunken. His eyebrows were thick and prominent. His eyes were dark and piercing. If he spoke, his voice was soft and calm.[16]

Another author who knew the Shaykh directly refers to his 'extraordinary radiance, an irresistible personal magnetism', describing him as 'very affable, courteous, withdrawn, full of nuances', with 'tenacious will' and 'subtle ardor'.[17] Dr Caret described him in similar terms, referring to 'that Christ-like face, that gentle voice, so full of peace, those courteous manners' but also gives us other insights into the manner and make-up of the Shaykh, describing his 'motionless hieratic attitude which seemed at the same time perfectly natural', his apparent indifference to any of his own bodily ailments, his disinclination for any kind of proselytizing and his equanimity in the face of approaching death.[18] However, the most striking recollection comes from Schuon:

> In his brown jallabah and white turban, with his silver-grey beard and his long hands which seemed when he moved to be weighed down by the flow of his *barakah* (blessing), he exhaled something of the pure archaic ambience of Sayyidna Ibrahim al-Khali [Abraham the friend of God]. He spoke in a subdued, gentle voice, a voice of splintered crystal from which, fragment by fragment, he let fall his words… His eyes, which were like two sepulchral lamps, seemed to pierce through all objects, seeing in their outer shell merely one and the same nothingness, beyond which they always saw always one and the same reality – the Infinite. Their look was very direct, almost hard in its enigmatic unwaveringness, and yet full of charity.[19]

But, as illuminating as Schuon's description is, let us leave the last word with the Shaykh himself: 'The gnostic is with Allah in retreat and no one knows him in that respect'.[20]

Readers interested in Al-Alawi's writings and teachings should turn to Lings' biography but we can catch something of his own spiritual modality and teaching method in his description of the practice of his own Master, Shaykh al-Buzidi. The passage in question is worth quoting at some length:

> As to his way of guiding his disciples, stage by stage, it varied. He would talk to some about the form in which Adam was created and to others about the cardinal virtues and to others about the Divine Actions, each instruction being especially suited to the disciple in question. But the course which he most often followed, and which I also followed after him, was to enjoin upon the disciple the invocation of the single Name with distinct visualization of its letters until they were written in his imagination. Then he would tell him to spread them out and enlarge them until they filled all the horizon. The *dhikr* would continue in this form until the letters became like light. Then the Shaykh would show the way out of this standpoint – it is impossible to express in words how he did so – and by means of this indication the Spirit of the disciple would quickly reach beyond the created universe provided that he had sufficient preparation and aptitude. Otherwise there would be need for purification and other spiritual training. At the above-mentioned indication the disciple would find himself able to distinguish between the Absolute and the relative, and he would see the universe as a ball or a lamp suspended in a beginningless, endless void. Then it would grow dimmer in his sight as he persevered in the invocation to the accompaniment of meditation, until it seemed no longer a definite object but a mere trace. Then it would become not even a trace, until at length the disciple was submerged in the World of the Absolute and his certainty was strengthened by Its Pure Light. In all this the Shaykh would watch over him and ask him about his states and strengthen him in the *dhikr* degree by degree until he finally reached a point of being conscious of what he perceived through his own power. The Shaykh would not be satisfied until this point was reached, and he used to quote the words of God which refer to: *One whom his Lord hath made certain, and whose certainty He hath then followed up with direct evidence.*

> When the disciple had attained this degree of independent perception… the Shaykh would bring him back again to the world of outward forms after he had left it, and it would seem to him the inverse of what it had been before, simply because the light of his inward eye had dawned. He would see it as Light upon Light and so it had been before in reality.[21]

*

We started with some words from Al-Alawi's most eminent and influential disciple, Frithjof Schuon whose short poem also furnishes us with an appropriate epitaph:

Shaykh Ahmad was a holy Sufi Shaykh
Who led souls to the kingdom of the Most High;
People flocked to him – the sage gave everything
That liberates us from the curse of the Fall;
He made the soul like unto a lark –
O sweet magic of the God-filled sound.[22]

Drawing by Frithjof Schuon[23]

Principal Sources

There is one authoritative and peerless English-language source on the Shaykh: *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) by Martin Lings*,* first published as *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961) but was soon revised and re-titled for the 1973 edition. It includes extracts from the Shaykh's own writings (religious treatises, poems, newspaper articles, letters) as well as a fascinating narrative by a French doctor, Marcel Carret, concerning his own Algerian encounter with the Shaykh. Lings also present some passages from an important but rather inaccessible article in French by Frithjof Schuon, 'Rahimahu Llah', *Cahiers du sud*, Aug-Sept 1935. For a compilation of some of al-Alawi's writings, see *Two Who Attained: Twentieth-Century Sufi Saints, Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi & Fatime Al-Yashrutiyya*, translated by Leslie Cadaver and introduced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (Louisville: Fons Vitae., 2005). Fragmentary information can also be found in Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), and Mateus Soares De Azevedo, *Men of a Single Book: Fundamentalism in Islam, Christianity and Modern Thought* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010) and in several online articles which, in the main, are no more than patchworks of material lifted from the Lings book. Readers of French might turn to a recent biographical study of the Shaykh by Éric Geoffroy, published in 2021.

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1 *Songs Without Names*, Fourth Collection, XXVI, 18.

2 See Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2010, Note 22, 181.

3 On Schuon's time in Mostaganem and his encounter with the Shaykh, see Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 29-34.

4 Frithjof Schuon, 'Rahimahu Llah', *Cahiers du sud*, Aug-Sept 1935.

5 Schuon, 'Rahimahu Llah', quoted (and, we may surmise, translated) by Martin Lings in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* 116.

6 fonsvitae.com/product/two-who-attained-twentieth-century-sufi-saints-shaykh-ahmad-al-alawi-fatima-al-yashrutiyya/

7 I have standardized the various spellings of the title – shaykh, shaikh, sheikh, cheikh – to 'shaykh' throughout. Likewise I have made uniform the rendition of the Shaykh's name, referring to him throughout by the name which he only assumed after his spiritual apprenticeship.

8 Some scholars have recently located his birth year as, variously, 1872, 73 & 74. See, for example, Eric Geoffroy, 'Sheikh Ahmad al-Alawi'; consciencesoufie.com/bibliographie-le-cheikh-ahmad-al-alawi/

9 from *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 48-49.

[10] *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* 49-50. (The Shaykh's autobiographical narrative can also be found at: 'Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi – His Life in His Own Words', posted by 'Occidental in Exile'; https://occidentalexile.wordpress.com/2010/05/17/ (The Shaykh married and divorced more than once but, it seems, managed to maintain cordial relations with his former wives and their families.)

[11] Al-Alawi quoted in the source cited immediately above.

[12] Richard Lang 'Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi (1869-1934)'; headless.org/e-books_webapp.htm

[13] Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 209, 83n.

[14] An excerpt from the relevant treatise can be found in Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 117-118n.

[15] Augustin Berque, 'A Modernist Mystic: Sheikh Benalioua' (unhappily titled, first published in 1935, not without errors but neither without interest as it comes from an author who knew the Shaykh personally. Berque refers to al-Alawi as he was known earlier.

[16] 'Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi: His Life in His Own Words', posted by 'Occidental in Exile'; occidentalexile.wordpress.com/2010/05/17/

[17] Augustin Berque, 'A Modernist Mystic: Sheikh Benalioua'

[18] Dr Caret's recollections of the Shaykh can be found in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* 13-33.

[19] Schuon, 'Rahimahu Llah', quoted in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 117.

[20] Karimah K. Stauch, " A 20th-century Maghreb Sufi Shaykh: Shaykh Ahmad Al-Alawi'; www.livingislam.org

[21] *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* 54-55.

[22] Poem by Frithjof Schuon, XXVI in *Fourth Wheel* Volumes IV-VII, 2006, 9.

[23] *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* facing page 160.

BOOK REVIEWS

Frances Wilson, *Burning Man: The Ascent of D.H. Lawrence*
London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

As both a writer and a literary celebrity D.H. Lawrence caused a tremendous splash in the years between the publication of *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and his death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-four (1930). Thereafter his reputation went into a tailspin until the appearance of *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955), in which F.R. Leavis, the most commanding English critic of his generation, declared that 'never was there a greater master of what is widely supposed to be the novelist's distinctive gift: the power to register, to evoke, life and manners with convincing vividness – evoke in the "created" living presence that compels us to recognise truth, strength and newness of the perception it records. To say that [Lawrence] exercises it incomparably over the whole social range doesn't suggest the full marvel.' The redoubtable Cambridge don evinced no interest in Lawrence's work as a travel writer, poet, essayist, dramatist and critic, focusing his stern critical gaze on the novels and short stories, elevating Lawrence to the A-list of novelists comprising 'the Great Tradition'.

Lawrence was soon also attracting more serious attention as a searing critic of industrialism. In his landmark study *Culture and Society* (1958) Raymond Williams situated him in a distinguished lineage of social commentators stretching back to William Blake. A few years later the infamous obscenity trials of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, on both sides of the Atlantic, ensured the popularity of Lawrence's work with the wider reading public. Various film and television adaptations followed, ranging from Jack Cardiff's flawed but interesting adaptation of *Sons and Lovers* (1960) to Sleaze-Meister Ken Russell's *Women in Love* (1969), all feeding the popular image of Lawrence as a champion of sexual freedom and the unbridled life of the senses, a rebel against Victorian puritanism. But then came Kate Millet's incendiary *Sexual Politics* (1970), soon to become a canonical feminist text. Millett's critical fusillade was aimed directly at the misogynistic sexual politics of three writers – Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer – whom she identified as

patriarchal propagandists. Here is Wilson glossing Millett's prosecution of Lawrence's story 'The Woman Who Rode Away':

> The story, said Millett, was 'monstrous', 'demented', 'sadistic pornography', a snuff-movie 'reeking of Hollywood'. The scene, she argued, in which the woman, preparing for her sacrifice, stands between the priests while 'the throng below give the low, wild cry' is shot in 'MGM technicolor'. After Millett's verdict, Lawrence dropped off university reading lists and was thrown into the Inferno where he has remained ever since (*Burning Man*, 389-90).

Wilson goes on to offer an alternative reading of the story. However, her project at large is not primarily a critical recuperation but a biographical narrative in which she seeks to explore the many ironies and ambiguities in the life and work of this strange, complex and often baffling artist, a man 'composed of mysteries rather than certainties'.

Early on Wilson, reflecting on her own experiences as a reader, gives us an overview of her subject. The passage is worth quoting at some length not only as a statement of the central theme but as specimen of her lively style.

> Where once I found insight, I now find bewildering levels of naivety: for all his claims to prophetic vision, Lawrence had little idea what was going on in the room let alone the world. His fidelity as a writer was not to the truth but to his own contradictions, and reading him today is like tuning into a radio station whose frequency keeps changing. He was a modernist with an aching nostalgia for the past, a sexually repressed Priest of Love, a passionately religious non-believer, a critic of genius who invested in his own worst writing. Of all the Lawrentian paradoxes, however, the most arresting is that he was an intellectual who devalued the intellect, placing his faith in the wisdom of the very body that throughout his life was failing him. Dismantle his contradictions, however, and you take away the structure of his being: D.H. Lawrence, the enemy of Freud, impressively defies psychoanalysis.

Are these 'contradictions' the Blakean Contraries in all their creative tension or rather, symptoms of a conflicted and confused personality, of 'a sickness of the soul' to which Lawrence himself refers? Wilson leaves room for readers to reach their own conclusions. The central conceit of her book, alluded to in the title, is the assimilation of a decade of Lawrence's tempestuous and troubled adult life and the pilgrim's three-stage journey in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Inferno (England, 1915-1919), Purgatory (Italy 1919-1922), Paradise (1922-1925). Wilson's sustained development of this motif is imaginative, nimble, witty, often illuminating but perhaps a bit of a stretch.

Lawrence is not an immediately sympathetic subject and Wilson resists any temptation to airbrush his many faults and foibles: his flagrant misogyny (sometimes wrapped up in pseudo-mystical mumbo-jumbo); his high-octane temper and abrasive rudeness not only to his critics and enemies but to his friends, his benefactors, and his wife Frieda (who actually returned serve with interest); his stinginess with money (often in short supply); his ranting about Big Subjects (Life, Sex, Body, Blood, God, Consciousness, Modern Life and the like); his ravenous appetite for tantrums, melodrama and self-mythologizing; his inability to *settle* in either a physical or a psychological sense. (Wilson, commendably, does not indulge in facile psychologizing but we can sheet some of this home to Lawrence's traumatic childhood and his well-known Mother Issues.) But then there is also Lawrence's insatiable curiosity, his tenderness with animals, his tenacious loyalty to Frieda and to his own peculiar conception of marriage, his commitment to his vocation as an artist, his acute sensitivity and vulnerability. It is testament to Wilson's skill as a biographer that we find ourselves painfully and sympathetically involved, enmeshed as it were, in Lawrence's many emotional, domestic, financial, artistic and spiritual predicaments. In telling Lawrence's story Wilson also introduces us to a gallery of colourful characters who move in and out of Lawrence's life like so many actors on a raised stage: Ottoline Morrell, Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Hilda Doolittle (England), Norman Douglas, Maurice Magnus, Compton Mackenzie, Rebecca West (Italy), Aldous Huxley, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Dorothy Brett (New Mexico), and many other eccentrics of various stripe, each of them deftly sketched. It all makes for a very heady read, often hilarious, sometimes poignant, never less

than fiercely engaging. I haven't enjoyed a life story so much since Sue Prideaux's *I am Dynamite: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (2019).

I should add that Wilson is also a fine critic; erudite, whip-smart, supple, eloquent, amusing, perhaps occasionally a little too ingenious but always interesting. She is faithful to Lawrence's own dictum, 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.' Wilson offers us many provocative readings of the major novels but for my money, *Sons and Lovers* notwithstanding, Lawrence's most durable achievements are as a short-story writer, poet, critic and travel writer. Wilson brings a fresh eye to his work in each of these genres, reminding us that the autobiographical element is never far from the surface. All of Lawrence's writings, she insists, no matter what the genre, were 'exercises in autofiction', all 'accounts of what it was like to be D.H. Lawrence'.

Wilson's pulsating biography has been showered with accolades from all sides: an 'astonishing tale', 'utterly enthralling', 'brilliantly unconventional', 'a red-hot, propulsive book', 'a virtuoso performance', 'gloriously vivid', 'a work of art in its own right'. It deserves them all!

–*News Weekly* (Melbourne), July 2022.

Ray Monk, *Inside the Centre: The Life of J. Robert Oppenheimer*
London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.

The title of Ray Monk's biography of Robert Oppenheimer plays on several 'centres': the entrancing interior of the atom wherein physicists found the secrets of nuclear energy; the institutional centres of American intellectual life which served as Oppenheimer's professional milieu; the seductive hubs of political power to which he felt a fatal attraction; his own inner life, full of strange shadows and paradoxes.

By the late forties, so well-known was Oppenheimer in America that the popular magazine, *Physics Today*, could represent him on its cover by no more than a porkpie hat. Even today, half a century and more later, almost everyone knows something about 'the Father of

the Bomb' – his pivotal role as head of the Manhattan Project and scientific director of the Los Alamos Laboratory; his now well-known allusions to the *Bhagavad Gita*, triggered by the Trinity test at Alamogordo; the post-war disagreements with Edward Teller about the H-bomb and his torment over a possible nuclear Armageddon; his early dalliance with communism which was later seized on by the guard-dogs of American 'security' (McCarthyite politicians, Hoover and the FBI, opportunistic careerists in the academy, sabre-rattling generals, and others of similar ilk).

A burgeoning literature has accumulated around both the nuclear arms program inaugurated by the Manhattan Project and Oppenheimer's life and work: the major landmarks include Richard Rhodes' *The Making of the Atom Bomb* (1986) and *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1995), Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005) and *Oppenheimer: the Tragic Intellect* (2006) by Charles Thorpe. Monk's avowed purpose is to remedy a conspicuous lacuna in this ever-proliferating body of writings, namely the absence of a detailed examination of Oppenheimer's career as a physicist. In any case, says Monk, the man cannot be fully understood in isolation from his work.

Ray Monk's track record is impressive. He has produced reputable biographies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, each rooted in prodigious research, shaped by a dispassionate approach, written in lucid prose and informed by a sharp eye for the suggestive detail and the telling anecdote. As a biographer Monk knows well how to contextualize his subject, construct a narrative, and to throw into sharp relief the contours of a life. He also, in the main, keeps out of the way, eschewing too much editorializing and crediting readers with enough intelligence to make their own judgements and discriminations. As Monk signals in his Preface, the biography spotlights Oppenheimer's professional life as a physicist and academic. This entails some lengthy excursions into the arcane world of sub-atomic physics and a painstaking exposition of the work of a glittering constellation of scientists with whom Oppenheimer developed close professional and personal ties. We meet, amongst others, Einstein, Niels Bohr, Max Born, Paul Dirac, Hans Bethe, Ernest Lawrence, Enrico Fermi, Edward Teller, Julian Schwinger and

Richard Feynman – a veritable roll-call of the century's most eminent physicists. Monk certainly realizes one of his governing purposes through a detailed mapping of Oppenheimer's contribution to modern science. This is no small accomplishment. He also tells us everything we might want to know about Oppenheimer's unique contribution to the Manhattan Project and about his life as a public intellectual (terrain pretty thoroughly worked over in previous biographies). Always informed, sober and thoughtful, our biographer addresses 'Oppenheimer's place in history, his impact on American society, and that society's impact on him' (Preface, xi.). He carefully tracks a path through the Kafkaesque labyrinths of McCarthyite politics in the early fifties and provides a nuanced account of Oppenheimer's unhappy involvements with the security establishment – a murky story from which no one emerges with much credit. No question, Monk's achievement in these respects is formidable indeed and should be warmly applauded.

However, in his Preface Monk also says this: 'what *most* interests me is Oppenheimer *himself*, his extraordinary intellectual powers, his emotional and psychological complexity and his curious mixture of strengths and weaknesses in dealing with other people.' Compared to the task of unravelling this 'psychological complexity', the world of sub-atomic physics is mere child's play! Oppenheimer's personality was, to say the least, enigmatic, his motivations opaque, his behaviour occasionally bizarre, often unfathomable. Monk certainly uncovers some persistent motifs which go part way to solving the many riddles of Oppenheimer's life: his detachment from his Jewish heritage, his intense patriotism and fervent commitment to an *idea* of America, his addiction to work and determination to always be the Main Man, his apparent incapacity for familial intimacy, his attraction to the austere beauty of the New Mexico desert, his vague but potent spiritual yearnings. But whilst Monk avows an interest in the whole man, there are many aspects of Oppenheimer's experience in which the biographer evinces not the smallest interest. This could perhaps be partly justified by the fact, accented by Monk, that many of Oppenheimer's previous biographers have focused on the personal and/or political aspects of his life to the neglect of his work as a physicist. But faced with a door-stop biography of over 800 pages, and given Monk's stated interest in the man, the reader is surely

entitled to expect a much fuller account of Oppenheimer's emotional life and of his family relationships. The friendship with his brother Frank is given detailed consideration but about Oppenheimer's love affairs, marriage, closest friendships, and his troubled relations with his children we learn little or nothing. Nor are Oppenheimer's deep interests in literature and Eastern philosophy given more than cursory attention. Oppenheimer is a perplexing and elusive subject and one certainly does not want one of those impertinent attempts at a glib 'psychoanalysis' which litter much contemporary biography… but still! Despite the massive accumulation of detail in Monk's biography we arrive at the end with many questions unanswered and with only a fugitive sense of the flesh-and-blood person.

Another thing: the treatment of a raft of moral and intellectual questions in which one might have supposed that Monk, as a professional philosopher, would have a serious interest. Was the Manhattan Project, and indeed, modern science as a whole, a Faustian bargain bound to yield a bitter and malignant harvest? Did Dostoevsky indeed portend the future when he claimed that 'without God, everything is permitted'? What dark impulses fuelled an enterprise hitherto justified by the need to beat the Nazis to the bomb once it was clear, well before the end of the European war, that Germany's nuclear weapons program was no more than a faint gleam in Werner Heisenberg's mind? Might we not see some connections between the instrumentalist rationality of the Enlightenment and the barbarities of the 20th century – not only Hiroshima but Auschwitz, Dresden, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Rwanda and Srebenica as well? Might not *scientism* – the triumphalist *ideology* of modern science which acknowledges no authority outside itself and of which Oppenheimer himself was a fervent apostle – be held to account for the sins of Frankenstein's children? Monk either skirts around or gives no more than a token nod to these vexing questions. Perhaps we should not expect more from an analytic philosopher. Impressive though it is in many respects, *Inside the Centre* is something of a disappointment.

–*Australian Book Review*, No 352, June 2014.

Brenda Niall, *Friends and Rivals: Four Great Australian Writers*
Melbourne: Text, 2020.

Four faces peer out at us from the back cover: one is open-faced, amiable, the visage of a woman who seems to be happy in her own skin; another, is attractive, a touch exotic, her gaze fixed on something distant; the third is aloof, intelligent, stern and with an ironic gaze, 'a remote impersonal mask' as one acquaintance described it; the last is intense, direct and a little guarded. They belong respectively to the Australian women writers with whom the book is concerned: Ethel Turner, Barbara Baynton, Henry Handel Richardson and Nettie Palmer. What manner of book is this? A group biography, a loose collection of pen-portraits, a literary history, an analysis of the ways in which endemic patriarchal ideas, values and structures affected the work of these writers? Well, something of each.

Ethel Turner (1870-1958) was born in England, and lost her father and step-father before the struggling family moved to Australia. Not an easy childhood. Things took a turn for the better when Ethel, now at Sydney Girls High, discovered a facility for writing children's stories and was soon contributing to newspapers and magazines. From an early age she set her sights on fame, wealth, domestic security and social position. The first two ambitions were secured by the publication in 1894 of the wildly successful *Seven Little Australians*, a story of lively and rebellious children growing up in suburban Sydney. Her other two aspirations were realized through a long and happy marriage to Herbert Curlewis, a lawyer, later an academic and judge. Over the next three decades Turner produced forty-odd books, mostly in the vein of *Seven Little Australians* though none matched that book's popularity. One ambition – to write adult fiction admitting her to the ranks of Australia's 'serious' literary novelists – remained unrealized.

Barbara Baynton (1857-1929) carved out a permanent niche in Australian literature with a remarkable collection of short stories, *Bush Studies* (1902), focusing on the squalid conditions and cruel circumstances of many women living in the bush: a bitter antidote to the bush legend being created by Lawson, Paterson and other contributors to *The Bulletin*. The rest of her literary output was

meagre. After exorcising the traumas and demons of her own early life in the bush, in these scarifying stories, she produced only a trickle of literary work. As Niall observes, 'Anger gave her stories their strange power, and when anger yielded to social ambition, she had no more to say.' Baynton's most sustained fictional achievement was the construction of a life-story which bore little resemblance to the facts. An 'illegitmate' birth, a ne'er-do-well runaway father, a wretched childhood, various family disgraces, poverty, hard labour as a domestic and 'governess', an early marriage to a scoundrel – these were no gateway to the material comfort and social eminence which she craved. Armed with a fictional personal history she married a wealthy and benign Sydney doctor, collected rare *chinoiserie*, made a big splash on the social scene in both Australia and England, astutely managed a large inheritance from the good doctor, and eventually snared a new husband, an English aristocrat whom she soon abandoned after he turned down an offer to become King of Albania!

Henry Handel Richardson's life-story (1870-1946) – the early loss of her father, a disrupted and peripatetic childhood in rural Victoria, her years at Presbyterian Ladies College, musical training in Leipzig, marriage to an English intellectual, a reclusive life in London – is much more widely known, thanks in part to her semi-autobiographical novels, *Maurice Guest* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, and her memoir *Myself When Young*. She became a major-league novelist with the towering three-volume *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* which took her within a whisker of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. (In the year in question, 1933, the Prize went to the now largely forgotten Russian Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin. Richardson should have been a walk-in.)

Nettie Palmer (1885-1964) was a teacher, poet, essayist, biographer and literary critic who, with her husband Vance Palmer and the *Meanjin* coterie, was a vigorous champion of Australian literature at a time when the serious study of Australian writers was more less non-existent. 'In no other country,' she wrote, 'was so little known about its own literary work; no country in which ignorance in such matters was condoned and even admired.' Her *Modern Australian Fiction* (1924) was one step in her life-long campaign to bring Australian writing into the collective consciousness, while her

Henry Handel Richardson (1950), was, astoundingly, the first book-length study of *any* Australian author.

Friends and Rivals? Well, the paths of these four women criss-crossed at various points but none of their relationships really amounted to friendship: their encounters were too infrequent or intermittent, their relations too distant and often uncomfortable. There was never any intimacy between them, nor any apparent literary influence. Nor were they in any meaningful sense 'rivals' though their dealings with each other were sometimes competitive and not always free of jealousy. Partly this was to do with their disparate writerly domains and purposes: Turner was a gifted writer of children's stories who devoted much of her time to her family, to the Sydney social scene and to charitable works (the latter bringing her into contact with Baynton; both were tireless and generous advocates for unmarried and abandoned mothers and their children). Baynton's considerable literary talent not withstanding, she was more interested in antiques, and in moving about with the rich and famous than with the writerly life. (Incidentally, of the four subjects of the book, Baynton, with her high-spirited personality, her waspish tongue, and her penchant for shocking people, would probably have been the most lively dinner guest.) Once decided on a literary career, and protected by a benevolent and wealthy husband, Richardson, in almost impregnable isolation in the middle of London, devoted herself to writing with a ruthless monastic discipline. Nettie Palmer, a few lightweight poems and stories aside, was never a direct rival of any of the others, her work being primarily journalistic and critical. So, four writers with divergent trajectories, working in different genres, not tied together by any close personal or professional bonds. A pedantic critic might also quarrel with Niall's sub-title 'Four Great Australian Writers'. Great? Richardson undoubtedly; Baynton if one allows the adjective on so small an *oeuvre*; but Turner and Palmer were comparatively minor talents which is not to deny them an honourable place in our literary history.

Despite the title then, this is not a book which dives deep into the relations and reciprocal influences of a close-knit literary group such as we find in Nicholas Delbanco's highly entertaining account of just such a group – Conrad, Henry James, Ford Maddox Ford, HG Wells and Stephen Crane – in *Group Portrait* (1982). (We know that Niall is

more than capable of writing a splendid group biography: *The Boyds: a family biography* is there to prove it.) Nor is this a study of the emotional and intellectual currents swirling around in a particular cluster of writers at a decisive moment, such as we get in Bill Goldstein's *The World Broke in Two* (2017), examining the interactions of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster in a single year, 1922. And neither is *Friends and Rivals* an inquiry into deep-seated, often ambiguous and sometimes creative artistic rivalries-friendships of the kind which Sebastian Smee examined in his very engaging *The Art of Rivalry* (2016).

But the unhappy title should not distract us from the book's attractions and achievements, amongst them the following: the adroit management of what we might call an ensemble cast, and the interweaving of several narrative threads; the foregrounding of the difficulties – domestic, financial, commercial and social – confronting women writers in the early decades of the last century; an even-handed treatment of the marriages which played a significant role in the writing careers all four writers; the skilful evocation of the several milieux in which these women moved without ever allowing period detail to blur the focus; the refurbishment of the reputations of Ethel Turner and Nettie Palmer (those of Richardson and Baynton requiring no such attention), and the valorisation of children's stories and criticism as literary forms. One interesting aspect of the story is the Anglo-Australian divide and the cultural cringe which figured so prominently in literary circles until very recent times. Above all the book presents sympathetic portraits of the four women, concentrating on their achievements but by no means ignoring or white-washing their faults and foibles. The narrative is given added colour and movement by the brief appearances of many of the leading literary figures of the period such as A.G. Stephens, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin, Randolph Stow and Martin Boyd.

Niall's skills as a biographer are once again evident here. She evades several dangers which have ambushed so many literary biographers of recent times: excessive editorializing, impertinent psychologizing, the tedious accumulation of banal detail, a prurient interest in the sex lives of their subjects, pretentious and jargon-riddled 'theorisations' of biography as a form, and the strenuous pushing of ideological barrows. *Friends and Rivals* is thoroughly

researched, the narrative coherent, the prose clear, the treatment of the material intelligent and thoughtful, the production attractive. It's a book of some charm and elegance, and a fine read. It will add lustre to Brenda Niall's well-deserved reputation as a scholar, biographer and story-teller.

–*News Weekly* (Melbourne), June 2021

Rowan Williams, *Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way*
London: SPCK, 2019.

'The Christian Way'? A large and slippery subject. The ways in which it is understood will vary, sometimes wildly, depending on the vantage point from which it is considered. Imagine we ask the following to articulate their understanding of 'the Christian way': an Orthodox monk, a Ugandan farmer, a Mississippi fundamentalist, a Scandinavian Calvinist, a Latin American exponent of 'liberation theology', an Ethiopian Copt, a Mormon, a Samoan nun. The divergences will widen if we roam through time as well as space. Beyond the centrality of Christ there's not a lot we can take for granted as common ground. What's on offer here is a series of ruminations on the question by Rowan Williams, Welshman, scholar, poet, theologian, Archbishop of Canterbury, Master of Magdalene College, and life peer ('Baron Williams of Oystermouth' no less!).

Twenty short pieces, many of them starting life as sermons, addresses, commemorations, or literary musings. Each focuses on a particular figure but none offer a rounded portrait or even so much as a biographical sketch. Just jottings which prompt Williams to isolate some aspect of the subject's life or thought in order to tease out a particular theme or motif which bears on his larger subject. An example. One of Williams' exemplars of 'the Christian Way' is William Wilberforce, the tireless political campaigner who did so much to end the hideous British slave trade. Williams' short essay tells us nothing we don't already know about Wilberforce's life. Rather, he singles out for further reflection Wilberforce's conception of the relation between public life and Christian morality, and his understanding of

both the imperatives and the limits of the state's moral accountability, if one may put it that way. After carefully pointing out that Wilberforce was never in favour of imposing moral codes by way of statute, he goes on to identify the motive force of Wilberforce's campaign:

> … if the state enacts or perpetuates in the corporate life of the nation what is directly contrary to Christian understanding of God's purpose for humanity – if it endorses slavery, for instance – the Christian is bound to protest and to argue in the public sphere for change… This is something that implicates every citizen, irrespective of his or her personal choices. There is a difference between matters of personal choice and those other matters which, because they help to determine the economy of a whole society, involve everyone who benefits from that economy. So Christian activism is justified primarily when the state is responsible for… compromising the morality of all its citizens (p.85).

Wilberforce's campaign is fuelled not only by a compassionate concern for the suffering and humiliation of the slaves, but by a sense that the whole of British society is soiled by its collusion in the evil trade. I highlight this passage for a couple of reasons: it gives a fair sample of Williams' plain and accessible style, and it foregrounds one of his abiding concerns not only in this compilation but throughout his own life, an on-going inquiry into the role of Christian institutions and individuals in the public life of the nation. For many Australian readers the passage above will resonate in respect to such issues as climate change, the treatment of refugees or responses to the current pandemic, issues which confront us with questions about the shadowy boundaries between 'personal choices', the 'determination of the economy' and the obligations of the Christian citizen.

The range of Williams' interests and sympathies can be gauged by his choice of subjects who flit across the stage in chronological order: St. Paul the Apostle, St. Alban, the two St. Augustines (of Hippo and Canterbury), two martyrs of the English Reformation (Cranmer and Tyndale), John Milton, three mystics (Meister Eckhart, St. Teresa of Avila, Sergei Bulgakov), three 19th century social reformers (Wilberforce, Dickens, Florence Nightingale), and four 20th century

figures whose Christian commitments led to an early and sacrificial death (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Etty Hillesum, Oscar Romero – to whom we might add Simone Weil). It is only meet and right that the Archbishop should have a particular interest in his predecessors at Canterbury, four of whom appear in the book: Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Cranmer and Michael Ramsey (the last the very model of what I imagine a good Anglican Churchman to be, as is Williams himself). Any alert reader will not fail to notice that this constellation of 'luminaries' includes three Jewish women who converted to Christianity though Simone Weil was never formally baptized, feeling that she needed to 'stay out in the cold' in solidarity with the majority of humankind who were not enfolded in the Church. Williams himself has been strenuously engaged in efforts to cleanse English public life of the deep-rooted scourge of anti-Semitism.

Well, what is 'the Christian way'? Williams never offers us a capsule answer to this question but it is implicit throughout. The key to the Christian way, a perpetual journey rather than a destination, is love. But this love, far from being simply an emotional disposition, a certain arrangement, as it were, of one's feelings, stems from an *awareness* of Divine Love which in turn informs and governs our dealings with the whole created order, most immediately the rest of humankind. Although he nowhere says so we can assume that the author would insist on the *indivisibility* of Christ's two Great Commandments, thus averting the pitfall of imagining that we can fully love our fellow humans without loving God or, more absurdly, of asserting that the Christian love of God might somehow short-change or defraud our neighbours. There are good reasons, adumbrated in *Luminaries*, as to why the first commandment must take precedence. Divine Love is dramatized and embodied in the life and Passion of Christ who was and is 'the face of God turned towards man, and the face of Man turned towards God'. (This felicitous formulation comes from the French Benedictine monk, Father Henri Le Saux, who spent the last twenty-five years of his life in India where he became known as Swami Abhishiktananda.) In their various ways all of the wayfarers within Williams' purview testify to these fundamental Christian verities to which the author himself has devoted his own life.

Rowan Williams, particularly during his tenure as leader of the Anglican Communion, has been a controversial figure, and has frequently been attacked both for being too 'liberal' and 'modern', and too 'conservative' and 'traditional'. Always a good sign when you're under attack from several different directions simultaneously! It would be ill-considered to hazard any assessment of Williams on the basis of this modest and slender book alone which comprises a series of sermons and occasional addresses, not a genre which allows his many talents free rein. More often than not Williams adheres to the admirable principle that a good sermon is a short sermon (from which it does not follow that a short sermon is a good sermon … but most of these are). Williams is a person of immense erudition, of deep but lightly-worn learning; he is a formidable theologian with a sensibility and cast of mind both literary and philosophical. His outlook might be characterized as a mystically-inflected and socially engaged Christian humanism. A casual reader of the present volume might easily sell him short. We need to understand the provenance of these pieces which are necessarily pitched at a level which makes them accessible to all and sundry. If we want to discover Williams as a high-octane intellectual we must turn elsewhere; his book on Dostoevsky, one of the most profound of Christian thinkers, might be a good place to start (*Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, 2008). Like Dostoevsky, Williams is deeply concerned with a Christian conception of freedom and suffering, with the existential implications of the Beatitudes, and with Christ's message about 'the insulted and the injured'.

For Williams religion is not an end in itself but a means, an indispensable guide on the journey to the deepest understanding of our condition and of the human vocation which, properly understood, cannot be divorced from our relationship with God. He never falls prey to sentimental religiosity and would no doubt endorse Martin Buber's dictum that 'It is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than with God.' Williams also steers clear of two degradations which have disfigured Christianity in modern times: the vaporous compromises and corrosive 'demythologizing' of a religious 'liberalism' in which 'anything goes', and the barren ossifications and censorious moralism of a rearguard religious

fundamentalism, today on unattractive display in many quarters. Williams' vision of Christianity is both sterner and more supple.

Whilst sometimes frustrated by the inevitable limitations of a compilation of pieces written at different times for a variety of purposes, but always constrained by the author's need to speak briefly to a 'general audience', I am glad to have been given some glimpses into the spiritual personalities of a cross-section of Christians across the centuries, and to share the insights of one of the more impressive and thoughtful Christian leaders of recent times. As Williams is best known as a Churchman it is perhaps appropriate to end with a passage which signals something of his vision of the 'body of Christ':

> The deepest unity of the body is created by Christ's own embrace without reservation of the appalling suffering, the helplessness and voicelessness, the guilt, the frustration, the self-doubt of human beings, so as to infuse into it his own divine compassion… It is an embrace offered to all, including those who are trapped in their own violence and inhumanity… .

–*News Weekly*, Melbourne, 2021

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Most of the material in this volume has not previously seen the light of day in published form. Such pieces that have been lifted from earlier publications have often been either compressed or expanded and revised. Details of their provenance: From *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (2004): Sister Nivedita, Alexandra David-Neel, Gary Snyder; From *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (2010): Paramahamsa Ramakrishna; From *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary* (2018): John Neihardt; From *The Sacred Heart Cathedral of Bendigo: Something Beautiful for God* (co-authored with Brian Coman and Frank Marriott) (2023): Henry Backhaus; From *Sacred Web*, 27, 2011: Algis Uzdavinys. Publication details of book reviews have been indicated in the text.

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*(*all published by World Wisdom Books)
• *The Betrayal of Tradition*, 2005.
• *Light from the East*, 2007.
• *Crossing Religious Frontiers*, 2010.
• *The Essential Whitall Perry*, forthcoming.

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The following volumes in the World Wisdom series of new translations of Frithjof Schuon's books, each now annotated and including 'Selections from Previously Unpublished Letters', are edited by H.O.
• *In the Face of the Absolute*, 2014.
• *To Have a Center*, 2015.
• *Treasures of Buddhism*, 2018.
• *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 2019.
• *The Eye of the Heart*, 2021.
• *The Play of Masks*, forthcoming.
• *Roots of the Human Condition*, forthcoming.

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