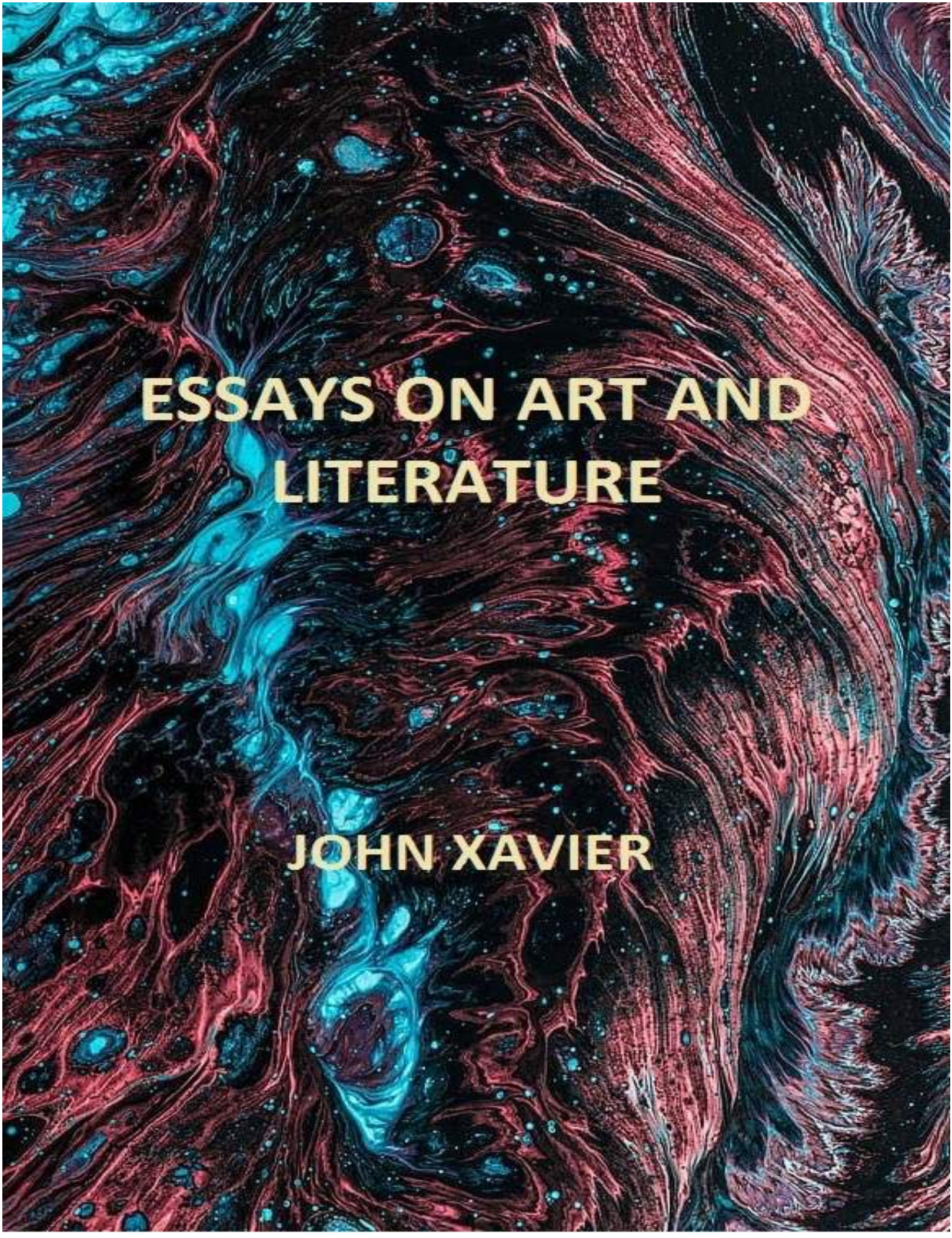
ESSAYS ON ART AND LITERATURE
JOHN XAVIER

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The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind.

William Blake

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ACTS OF GOD

Reconsidering Abraham and Isaac

The story of a man willing to slaughter his own son out of a sense of blind obedience strikes most people as rather horrific nowadays. Some especially religious individuals are prepared to offer justifications grounded in abstruse arguments about faith but these aren't even convincing on a personal level – none of the people who I've seen make such arguments have impressed upon me the lack of conscience and mercy necessary to convince me that they proselytize them in genuine confidence. Rather what appears to be happening is that people, eager to retain a personally sustaining belief in the bible, resort to a self-confounding sophistry in order to reconcile something grotesque with their emotionally invested belief in the god of said text. Atheists naturally mock this kind of thing and cite it as an example of the absurdity and moral hypocrisy of religious belief. As far as my own personal experience though, I've never seen an atheist, or any skeptic, disagreeing with the standard religious interpretations that prevail here. They seem content to accept the existing religious analysis of the story while merely drawing an opposite conclusion – rather than seeing Abraham as an example of virtuous faith then they see him as symbolic of the intellectual poison that constitutes faith in general. But what if both groups misunderstand the story?

The Offering of Isaac constitutes a very brief episode in the book of Genesis and yet this has provided a continuously renewed sense of moral anxiety for western civilization since the advent of Christianity. For some reason the story troubles many of us. Not only does it elude an easy understanding but even where claims are made to possessing a correct interpretation, these claims tend to be made without equal certainty in their comprehensiveness or definitiveness. Why

would God test anyone in such a way? Is God so blind to the truth in our hearts that we must be put on trial? The thread being unravelled from this question threatens to unspool the whole fabric of theology, potentially undermining the concept of any biblically grounded divinity – for an atheist of course such a thing simply confirms their own pre-existing biases. For an atheist, God isn't a mystery, God's a delusion – so only a believer can confront the mystery of God. But this doesn't mean that mere belief in God will necessarily result in a confrontation with the real mystery here. That is to say, we may think that we don't understand God and still misunderstand the scope of our own misunderstanding. Similarly, I think the story of The Offering of Isaac is so fundamentally misunderstood that the confusion most people correlate with it is a confusion that fails to actually engage the story's genuine mystery.

What God asks of Abraham doesn't make sense. Most religious readers will try to make sense of it but, if they can create any "sense" from this, maybe that only shows that they've distorted the story's real significance? Why should the infinite make any sense at all? Should the hypothetical source of all the complexity and wonder in the universe be casually intelligible? Should the motives of the almighty reveal themselves to us without extraordinary effort? Once we appreciate how ridiculous it is to expect the nature of God to be easily understood, the usual objections and explanations slathered over Abraham and Isaac by atheists and theists alike reveal how insipid they really are. Perhaps God is a bit subtle? Perhaps anything that is comprehended in a single afternoon of idle thought is, *ipso facto*, sufficient proof that it expresses nothing real about the divine? This is the point of departure where my alternative reading of Abraham and Isaac begins. It starts with not assuming that God wanted Abraham to obey.

Is morality primarily a form of obedience? Then it's merely a submission to authority. How would such an authority be recognized though? Even if you believe in absolute obedience to God, it still raises the question of what can be recognized as an authentic command from them. Some people will make the argument that God wouldn't allow a false command to masquerade as an authentic one but, supposing that's true, it would still be a truth arrived at through some form of internal justification independent of an external command. Clearly then a person can only obey a divine command, simply because it's a divine command, if their own conscience assents to this – if through some self-process they've first managed to subordinate themselves to the concept of obeying God

unequivocally. Unless of course they're fated to obeying God but in that case no choice is being made and so the obedience in question has no moral significance. Morality therefore is absolutely grounded within the domain of personal choice, not authority, and no amount of self-subordination can ever erase the underlying foundations of conscience it relies on. We are ultimately responsible for everything we willfully do, no matter what.

Let's suppose that God's interested in the truth. Let's also suppose that God's interested in the progress of humanity. Here we have some motives for God's actions. Can we make any inferences about how God will go about fulfilling these aspirations? Granting the creator of billions of galaxies a modicum of wisdom, we can expect God to act with a degree of sophistication. God may even be intelligent enough to use indirect means to fulfill certain aims. Could the command to sacrifice Isaac be such an act? Consider the possibility. Perhaps the real test wasn't whether Abraham would sacrifice Isaac but whether he wouldn't. Whether he'd resist. Maybe human disobedience is essential to the fulfillment of God's creation and that God has given humanity disobedience so that this disobedience can be honed to some specific end. In such a context, Abraham's obedience can be conceived as an instance of moral failure and God's interruption of the sacrifice as the point where God accepted said failure. After all, if divinity is absolutely invested in the cultivation of morally awakened human beings, then it will do whatever is necessary to usher them into that enlightenment.

So what was Abraham supposed to do? To merely refuse God's command would demonstrate no virtue, no moral excellence, so that can't be part of the divine scheme that we've outlined – yet it's the superficial dichotomy between this choice and Abraham's obedience that has led apologists to try and rationalize the latter. We can ask ourselves though whether there are other moral options besides these two which represent a higher form of moral fulfillment. In traditional apologies, Abraham is lauded for his sacrifice, for the personal loss he is content to endure in service to God; but what I would point out is that he also had the opportunity to negotiate with God as he himself had previously. Instead of slaying his son wouldn't it have been a greater moral sacrifice to offer himself in his son's place? In failing to do so I believe Abraham demonstrated that he hadn't yet achieved the moral self-actualization the divine aspires to cultivate in humanity. But from the seed of Abraham those would come one who did.

Reading the old and new testaments together, a wide variety of narrative tangents are encompassed, but together a single primary theme is discernible; the theme of sacrifice. Starting in Genesis, God sacrifices the totality of Themselves so that independent spiritual beings could emerge. Independence here means independence from external coercion and so a liberation from even the animal impulses that drive our selfishness is included. Through Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, and those that follow we see the struggle of humanity to ground itself in a transcendental sphere above itself and, as such, establish a condition of continuous self-progress. God provides this and, becoming like God, in proportion to our own limitations, is the goal which confronts each individual. Humanity however cannot improve beyond its ideals so the full transformation of the self means the willingness to accept a total sacrifice of the self. What that will amount to is an individual capable of sacrificing themselves for the fulfillment of eternity as a whole – something finally realized in the person of Jesus Christ.

Just as a good parent cultivates independence and self-sufficiency in their children, so too it's possible to interpret God, in so far as they're revealed in scripture, as working towards the liberation of their creation. Individuals dependent on the interventions of divine authority for their moral guidance are clearly inferior to those that personally possess moral consciousness and a sense of right and wrong emanating from their own conscience. This doesn't mean rejecting God of course but rather involves a greater degree of embracing through a self-incorporation of the divine – after all, we cannot admire anything more than by making it an essential part of ourselves. And the picture of the world that's been provided so far also accounts for the gradually declining manifestation of God throughout the biblical narrative. As human beings become more and more capable of fulfilling their own potential, less and less did they require acts of God to coerce them since they were engaged in a deeper communion with divinity through direct spiritual affinity. And where God did intervene, through prophetic visions and so on, it was with decreasing imposition. People no longer needed the brute force of external guidance because they'd acquired sufficient internal unity with the infinite to address the obstacles that faced them. In this way the divine continues to act in the world; but not over the world so much as through the world. The spirit of God inhabits people and we become the instruments of its fulfillment. So God no longer has to be present as an externally compulsory reality. As exemplified in the paragon of Jesus Christ, we become the agency through which acts of God are now achieved but our actions, without supernatural power, without

descending from lofty sources, become an adequate substitute for miracles; the means by which all the wounds of the world are healed. And what greater achievement could we imagine the divine realizing than this?

AN ANALYSIS OF YEAT'S *"THE SECOND COMING"*

In the years between the first and second world war, a wave of pessimism swept over Europe. Modern warfare had proved itself capable of unprecedented carnage and this, combined with the monstrous nature of industry at the time and the violent upheavals transpiring in all areas of culture, seemed to promise the arrival of an age of permanent darkness. Of course it's possible to pick out historical events that were already building towards the undoing of this malaise but, like seeds only just spreading roots in the earth, such events still remained beneath the surface of society. Above ground, a spiritual desolation prevailed and it was expressed most powerfully in two works of poetry at the time – T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming."

Yeats' poem is a terse twenty two lines but, like any masterpiece, it rewards a close reading and I propose to go through it in full. While doing so I'll make a special effort to try and show why the poem is a great literary achievement – however I'll also highlight some parts where I think improvements could've been made. My approach will consist primarily of direct textual considerations but, wherever external sources hold the prospect of illuminating anything, I won't hesitate to use them. Despite its reputation among some as an enigmatic work, I think its most significant elements can be outlined straightforwardly and this reveals more than just a single piece of writing or its author – it provides a platform for a rich appreciation of poetic genius itself. To proceed, here is the complete text of the poem for reference:

THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the
desert A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle
And what rough beast, its hour come round at
last Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Attending to the first two lines of the poem to begin with, the skillful use of repetition is worth remarking upon. The word “turning” is reiterated with a brute percussive emphasis to impress us with a kind of oppressive stagnation while also engraving a concrete image into our minds. Then a subtle disruption of that effect follows by another repetition but this time with a slight lyrical disparity between two diametrically opposed concepts – the falcon, the creature held in thrall, and the falconer, the person who controls it. Only here the notable symbolism pertaining to the master-slave dialectic is subordinated to a third element, the gyre which can now be interpreted as the unfolding of history as an independent factor. The master and the slave then are both slaves to something that defies their senses. This interpretation is reinforced once we furthermore appreciate the significance

of the term “gyre” in Yeats’ personal system of cosmology. In short, history is governed by the conflict of antitheses, principally in the forces of “Discord” and “Concord” (or Strife and Harmony) which exist in various degrees of proportion and are paralleled by the phases of the moon. As with the waxing and waning of the lunar cycle, the forces of Discord and Concord subvert one another when either is expanding – the Second Coming here then is transpiring in an age of culminating Discord, the widening gyre of the falcon being a concrete image that symbolizes the unfolding of this process.

The next four lines expand on this theme but I have a few critical judgements I feel I should bring up here. Unfortunately I think the phrase “Mere anarchy” works against the general momentum that’s already building in the poem and I’d want to modify it slightly. The word “mere” is dismissive, it dampens the ominousness of the anarchy in question, and it seems clear to me that the resonance of the line could be preserved by opening it with “Sheer anarchy.” Using “sheer” instead would magnify the gravity of chaos being invoked. Secondly, there’s an issue I have with the use of punctuation. I think it’d work better with a comma after “hold” and a semicolon after “world.” This creates a slight awkwardness in transitioning to the ensuing lines but that could be adequately addressed by adding a “now” so that line five read “Now the blood-dimmed tide is loosed” or some other comparable alteration. Also, the phrase “ceremony of innocence” doesn’t entirely hit the mark. A ceremony is always a contrived event and this goes against the underlying concept of innocence. To retain as much of the existing rhythm of the line while employing a term more consistent with the freedom and joy of innocence, “revelry” is the most effective substitute that comes to mind. To return to the poem’s merits though, the phrase “blood-dimmed tide” with its strength of consonance and the allusion to lunacy is worthy of a moment’s appreciation.

The two lines that follow and which end the first stanza are deservedly famous. They have a proverbial weight to them and capture a wide-scale affliction which burdens all civilization – the industriousness of evil in comparison to the passivity of the masses. Greed by nature is ambitious since, unlike serenity, it can’t satisfy itself with any state of being. It’s trapped in constant striving. Furthermore, humility is compelled to question its own beliefs and so can never achieve the untroubled determination that those with zero conscience possess. Yeats deftly captures all this in a single succinct couplet. It may be a grim assertion but it’s one that, like a lightning strike, has an appalling radiance to it.

At the outset of the second stanza, a notable shift in rhetorical style takes place. The prophetic language of the first stanza, absolute in its pronouncements, gives way to the voice of wrestling uncertainty and inwardly focused monologue. The Second Coming! We are invited to share in the speaker marvelling to himself and at this point I think it's safe to conclude that the voice here is not a *dramatis personae* but that of Yeats' himself – the *Spiritus Mundi* is troubling him. The phrase "out of *Spiritus Mundi*" suffers from grammatical inelegance though and the "out" here furthermore rings clumsily in conjunction with the "out" that ends the previous line. Changing it to "from the *Spiritus Mundi*" however solves both difficulties nicely. On the conceptual front meanwhile, the significance of the phrase "*Spiritus Mundi*" calls for some elaboration. Roughly translating to "*World Spirit*" or "Spirit of the World" it is like the well of all consciousness from which individual awareness is drawn and ladled. Once more (as with the master-slave antithesis earlier) we have an apparent echo of Hegelian philosophy. In summary, we are witnessing Yeats' plugged into the primordial source of insight as a symbolic vision of the future engulfs him.

The apocalypse the author undergoes takes the form of a malevolent resurrection out of Egypt. Its fantastical nature is underscored by the fact that, rather than a creature or even a being having "a lion body" it is a mere shape. This imbues it with a more sinister aspect. Admittedly the wording could be polished a bit – "A shape with a lion's body" being my preference – but that aside, the image of the conjured sphinx is striking. The simile where the stone gaze of the sphinx is compared to the blankness and pitilessness of the sun is excellently chosen – not only does it invoke the fearful power of the desert but there's a profound cosmological truth embedded here. The sun, as the source of light, represents the apex of illumination. Yet it's blinding. This Yeats' links to the blindness of lifeless eyes and so a unity is drawn between extreme opposites. Again, the eschatological nature of the poem rises to prominence.

Lines sixteen and seventeen give us more proof of Yeats' literary powers. The first of these is very deft in its choice of imagery. "Slow thighs" rather than say "slow body" conjures in the mind a kind of cinematic focus on a close-up portion of the sphinx. We can imagine the stone limbs in question grinding forward, dust and sand shaking off them, and the slowness of their movement serves to convey a kind of might and inexorableness. This is in sharp contrast to the shadows of the indignant

desert birds in line seventeen. They conversely offer us something insubstantial fleeing from the awakened sphinx. Also, the phrase “Reel shadows” suggests a kind of wild unspooling which works well with the gyre imagery already provided and the anarchy that’s being unleashed in the imagery provided.

The remaining lines of the poem then proceed to end the work in a gradual crescendo, like rolling thunder. The darkness that drops again is a reference to the general discord descending on the world (this is clarified by the second half of line eighteen on the other side of the semicolon) and it serves as a sort of rhythmical set up to the winding question that ensues. The “stony sleep” is the sleep of the sphinx of course since the birth of Christ – and the nightmare in question is the nightmare of said sphinx. Just as the three wise men were drawn towards the infant Jesus, so it seems that the sphinx has been awakened by the Second Coming. Before further exploring the meaning here, I want to comment on the magnificent lyricism of the last four lines. The use of alliteration in these, combined with the cadence generated by the perfect use of commas, all work together to give a necessary majesty to the language. We expect our oracles to have a certain grandeur and Yeats’ definitely achieves this. What beast is being born though? While Bethlehem is the place where Jesus was born, I think the use here is symbolic rather than literal. That is to say, Bethlehem represents the source of creation and, in its capacity as that, it is the nexus through which both Concord and Discord enter the world. The beast being born then is the opposite of Christ, the Antichrist, in its personified incarnation or, more generally, it is war. Consistent with Yeats’ cosmology of oppositions, we have the traditional conflict of Egypt versus Israel being implicitly made – or to use a phrasing more commonly employed, we have Babylon versus Jerusalem. The sphinx, the monster of dire riddles, is the harbinger of a trial being inflicted on humanity; one where our survival is at stake.

Since its publication, “The Second Coming” has been recognized by critics and readers alike as one of the best literary works of the twentieth century. No general anthology of English poetry is complete without it. Especially in our own era though, where so much of our literature is preoccupied with mundane concerns and contemporary banalities, this poem stands out for its profundity. For me personally, it serves as a stark reminder that human thought can engage itself in the most far reaching questioning and that this will even sometimes result in extraordinary cosmic insights. The wheels of the stars are always turning and whether or not we aspire to keep up with them, to catalyze greater revolutions

within ourselves, will determine our fate. “The Second Coming” stands as a testament to that vitality of spirit. A poetry devoted to eternity.

AUTHENTICITY AND BECOMING

"*Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom*." – Kierkegaard

Understanding this assertion requires an appreciation of Kierkegaard's use of the concept of anxiety here. Contrary to how it's generally understood today, what he means by anxiety is not something purely negative. Rather, anxiety is a necessary component of choosing for oneself. When we make a choice devoid of all anxiety, we are very likely not making a deep or meaningful choice. Even if our choice is concerned with something important in our lives, like a career path or a relationship commitment, we are not really choosing unless we wrestle with the real significance contained within the variety of our options.

Not living up to this is a kind of false choosing then – an illusion of choice where we are giving up the possibility of really choosing to uncritically follow some path laid out for us. This can be the result of expectations we perceive being imposed on us by society or some other kind of authority but regardless of the specific nature of the excuse we give ourselves, our willingness to abandon responsibility for our own choices is a flight from the anxiety they require. Not thinking is a kind of mental rest and naturally this can be alluring but, ultimately, we do lasting injury to ourselves by succumbing to it. Like a person desperate enough to drink saltwater when suffering from extreme thirst. Freedom can never be realized without anxiety.

Everything truly valuable in life demands some risk. In the context of freedom, we can say that freedom is realized to various degrees in an ascending manner with increasing perils. Freedom then is like a mountain and obtaining it in

its highest form can only be done by climbing the mountain all the way to its peak. Dizziness here is the uneasiness that afflicts us as a result of perceiving the possibility of choosing incorrectly and condemning ourselves to some kind of inescapable and tormenting conclusion. A fall into the abyss. At the same time though we can recognize that there is nothing to gain by denying ourselves freedom since this will amount to not truly realizing ourselves and so not becoming that which would really give us fulfillment. What we lose in the end by not choosing is our chance to truly become ourselves.

Anxiety then will always emerge where we are coming face to face with our real nature and character. Who are we? If we can be anxious at meeting some other person in life, naturally we'll probably be that much more anxious at the prospect of meeting ourselves in a state of real honestly. We needn't be perfectly conscious of the momentousness of our own freedom but by appreciating it we can realize a profound truth, that of the oneness of self-creation and self-discovery. The revelation of living.

BYRON'S DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB

The Poem

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Analysis

In a sense I think this poem is perfect but I want to clarify what I mean here. The perfection I'm referring to is relative to the ambitions that drive the creation of a specific work of art. Many haikus for example are flawless and, in that sense, perfect because they achieve everything they set out to. Now there are larger, what one can reasonably call more important, works of art which are not perfect. A good example would be T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland". It's a monumental piece of literature but I wouldn't call it flawless by any means. There are occasional points of awkwardness in its rhythm and creative choices that can be quibbled over - objections which in contrast I wouldn't propose for either "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or "The Hollow Men". Part of this simply stems from the fact that "The Wasteland" is a longer and more expansive work; and perfection becomes more difficult to sustain in the course of greater aims.

So I'm not arguing here that this poem of Byron's represents the highest level of poetic achievement simply because I'm willing to call it perfect. I do think that a poem of its scope achieving the level of craftsmanship that it does could only be the creation of a poet of the highest mastery and talent though. Since there are only six stanzas, I might as well go through each of them one by one to try and illustrate what I mean here:

1) Opening with a simple rhyme scheme and plain language, the poem starts off without resorting to any intellectual ingenuity. A "wolf on the fold" though is an impactful image and the next line flows nicely from this while also adding the symbolic and imagistic value of "gleaming in purple and gold". Both purple and gold were colors associated with majesty so already a great deal has been achieved in the first two lines to emphasize the strength of the Assyrians. The next two lines however really demonstrate Byron's talent as not only does he build off his already established "gleaming" imagery with including the tips of the Assyrian army's spears moving and glistening like the surface of a great body of water, he furthermore uses the sea of Galilee as a concrete example to introduce something quite incredible and poignant. Galilee of course is strongly linked to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, and here the stanza draws a contrast between the wolf force of the Assyrians and the sheep they are descending upon.

2) The next stanza then yields another contrast; this one more rapid and explicit. The strength of the Assyrians is compared to summer in its ascendency but

they're just as impotent before the greater power that governs the changing of the seasons and so just as inevitably they too succumb to a state of autumn. This is especially well chosen imagery because not only does it contain obvious symbolic value but it also captures an actual structural parallel. The leaves of summer have an inherent similarity to battle banners in their vividness and splendor while the fallen leaves of autumn are like an army scattered, pliant, and defeated.

3) Now death is given incarnation in an angel and the ease with which God destroys the Assyrians, the infinite disparity between human might and that of the cosmic and divine, is effectively conveyed by how the angel unleashes its destruction. Merely with its breath, with the most effortless action imaginable, it petrifies those that've been judged and condemned.

4) Focusing on the imagery of a dying horse now, Byron connects the Assyrians might with that of their own steeds. Just as horses are under the thrall of their human masters, so too the Assyrians are at the mercy of God. In addition, the foam from their gasping mouths is a particularly striking detail and connects back to the previous water imagery as well as to an additional symbolism being drawn out – that of the ocean spray powerlessly splashed by the force of its waves.

5) The fifth stanza now gives us a haunting image of the remains of the Assyrian army; an image of pure stillness that serves as an excellent conclusion for the fate of the Assyrians. This is also skillfully enhanced with a succession of four negative assertions about the destroyed army.

6) Lastly, Byron shifts the focus of the poem to the homeland of the Assyrians where the defeat of the army has essentially ruined the entire nation. Their people and religion have simultaneously been overwhelmed by the incomparable power of God. For the climax of the poem, Byron now offers the last of his masterful contrasts. Even though the Assyrians were untouched by any mortal weapon (Meaning any mortal power, and here the Assyrians also become symbolic of the Gentiles in general, meaning every unbeliever) they've been dissolved, like snow, merely by a glance. And not a glance of God but a glance by God. Meaning the metaphysical power of the Lord annihilated them simply by a look. Again, the extreme disparity in power is being highlighted.

With the commentary just provided, it should be obvious that my opinion of this poem is animated not simply by its aesthetic merits, although these certainly played a big part, but also by the acute philosophical insights which I perceive to be underlying it. In both respects though it demonstrates the merits that've earned it an enduring place in English literature.

CURSED WITH DIVINEST SENSE

"*Excess of sorrow laughs, excess of joy weeps.*" – Blake

William Blake remains underappreciated for his wisdom. Not only should he be placed among the company of the greatest aphorists, but his insights furthermore tend to be of an especially profound nature. Contrast him for instance with someone like Oscar Wilde who, although capable of genuine profundity himself, often spent his intelligence simply to acquire and dispense clever witticisms one can admire but which stimulate no deep sense of self-reflection when contemplated. Blake conversely was almost always reaching after eternal truths preoccupied with the most expansive existential concerns.

The remark I'm quoting here is a good example of this. The idea that joy and sorrow converge on one another in both directions, that sorrow doesn't simply decrease with joy and joy decrease with sorrow, but that when either is fully saturated they can transform into their opposite, has the startlingly paradoxical quality of a true mystical revelation. And yet I'm sure many besides myself have experienced sadness so deep that it pulled despairing laughter out of them. And one does not have to search far to find situations where people, overwhelmed with joy, are reduced to tears. So Blake's insight here is empirically supported and yet it's still strange to consider joy and sorrow as part of a circular continuum. It's maybe unsettling too because it seems to imply that any movement towards achieving joy inevitably also carries itself towards sorrow out of its own momentum. I expect many would prefer to think that joy is something that can be fully realized at some terminal instance where the struggle for happiness ceases and restful peace is be obtained. This desire then is something like the desire for

an end to a marathon and to not be committed in a Sisyphean manner to running endlessly around an oval track.

That said, I don't think Blake's assertion here demands a cycle of endless grief. Presumably we can still halt our own striving and so achieve some kind of stable equilibrium. Or exert control over how much we allow our own emotions to fluctuate. Conceivably, in fact I'd say it's a fairly obvious bit of wisdom, we do better to allow ourselves some possibility of sorrow - that without the risk of sorrow our lives would be so shallow as to become worthless. While it's good to minimize superfluous risks, eliminating all risks would require a retreat from the most valuable things that life has to offer. Just as joy and sorrow can revolve through one another, they each likewise appear to contain their counterpart as a necessary contrast to properly define themselves. Consider for example the traditional symbol for Yin and Yang – in it both the light and dark element contain their opposites within the core of their own domain. An idea obviously congruent with the perspective of William Blake.

Another thing Blake said was "*Energy is eternal delight*". That energy is antithetical to stagnation is a truism but acknowledging it we can furthermore infer that delight itself requires energy, that it's always an expression of energy and, as such, aspires to eternal energy. How would such energy be preserved in the fabric of being? How would it be embedded into the cosmos itself? Well, if things contained their opposites, if they were preserved from stagnation by having their own inverse principle within their core, then eternal stagnation would always be safeguarded against. Because then the possibility of transformation will always remain regardless of the state of things.

Some people might find the title quote from Blake grotesque. It does defy a certain kind of superficial rationalism. For me though, I actually find it quite reassuring. Because, while joy will never totally discard sorrow, more importantly, sorrow can never truly conquer joy. In the depths of all despair then there will always remain a joy imperishable.

DISENTANGLING KIERKEGAARD'S IDEA OF THE SELF

"Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self."

The Sickness unto Death, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong

The above paragraph concludes as if with a sweep of the hand – the equation of man with spirit is gradually drawn out in an artful manner until suddenly, the basis for the chain of reasoning that Kierkegaard was unspooling is dramatically inverted. This almost amounts to raising philosophical rhetoric to the level of a magician's theater but it'd be better to not assign this a merely spectacular significance. The technique here is not employed to entertain but rather for a more practical effect. I think Kierkegaard is attempting to disenchant us away from soothing deductions and the title of the work itself is consistent with the general idea that he's trying to instigate an awakening in his readers. This explains the harshness and morbidity of the title as well as the abrupt halting of the rhythm that he unleashes in the above paragraph.

What is Kierkegaard trying to get us to confront? Or to make use of some of his own phrasing – what is the quoted passage an upbuilding for? We are told that

man is not yet a self. Why? The answer is given to us already but only indirectly. Because spirit is the self and man is not yet a truly spiritual being. The synthesis between the finite and the infinite in which spirituality is realized remains unfulfilled in man and so even his capacity for having a mere self is obstructed. Of course the self is not simply a relation between the finite and the infinite, since this could be nothing more than a mechanical exchange, but instead the self consists in the relation between the finite and the infinite furthermore encompassing a relation to that relation. The connection between the finite and infinite here is substantiated by an active self-recognition which maintains the connection in the form of a continuous relationship. Until man's existence involves this engagement though, man will remain devoid of a true self.

It's important I think to emphasize the totality of the self's absence here prior to spiritual realization – before the finite and infinite have been brought into synthesis. This is because without that having occurred there's only finitude. Without a relation to the infinite, the finite is limited to an empty manifestation of existence and this lacks the relational order necessary to constitute minimal selfhood. The relation that relates itself to its own self is obviously a relation to every aspect of itself and in turn, a relation to every one of these new relations, and so on. Once a relation becomes self-referential it therefore becomes infinite and, as such, if man does not realize some synthesis of the infinite within his own finitude, he cannot achieve any level of true self-reference and so cannot yet become a self at all. Granting this, it follows that becoming a self, synthesizing the finite and infinite, cannot be gradually fulfilled.

Either the self has been realized or it has not been realized but one does not, through stages, develop a self. The self of course requires various elements to constitute itself but none of these apart from their totality can achieve any selfhood. The self after all can only exist in relation to itself as a self and it must therefore have a fully constituted selfhood with which it is always in relation to. However this is not to say that the self is always complete. The relation on which it depends is obviously a dynamic one and so it'd be erroneous to say that the self is only constituted by some kind of perfection. Rather the essential thing is that a single genuine relation exists! Because if the self is above all the aspects of the relations that relate itself to itself, then the foundation of its being is comprised within self-reference – so the reality of any relation at all will be the self in the process of relating to itself. To have a relation after all is to connect two separate

things and the only way two separate things can be connected is through apprehension in consciousness or spirit. Therefore the possibility of any separate things being related, the essence of genuine relationship, depends on the existence of a self. Without a self to form such a relation, there can be no synthesis of separate realities. Then the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity, will all remain divorced from one another. And that of course is often the prevailing state of things.

"The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed."

The Sickness unto Death, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong

The relation of the self to itself of course will be manifest through some form of self-consciousness. I have a self precisely because I know I have a self. At the same time then the absence or erosion of that relation will result in the total loss of self. To the extent that I am no longer conscious of myself as a self I can no longer act with any kind of self-interest – there is no longer a synthesis between the actuality of my being and the possibilities of my being. Without that capacity then I cannot act for myself and so there's no true self at all. Furthermore it becomes evident that this loss of capacity is protected only by the most fragile of things imaginable – our own inclination to remain self-conscious. The slightest distraction can pull us out of our relation to ourselves and given this we can agree with Kierkegaard that no other loss can occur so quietly. The hazard of the loss though is not diminished by the ease of it transpiring. What could be more critical to us than our own ability to become or remain conscious of what's genuinely important to us ourselves? Again, without the ability to synthesize our actuality and our possibilities we have nothing. We are nothing. In an instant the entirety of infinity has slipped through our grasp and we are left with a nothingness equally devoid of both freedom and necessity. These things after all can only have a relation to us in so far as we ourselves are related to them self-consciously. Relation here is limited to an actuality of consciousness.

Since a level of consciousness cannot simply fluctuate without cause, the question of being self-conscious is a question of the will to be self-conscious. As

soon as it is admitted that what the self includes within itself, what the self decides to constitute itself with as a synthesis of, falls within the limits of its own responsibility, then the definition of any particular self now becomes what it is that the self consciously chooses. Yes, there are constraints which prevent the self from making certain choices but these are all mere impossibilities – within the responsibility of the self then all its own possibilities must lie. To desire possibilities one was not responsible for would be precisely to not be a self and so to lose one's own self-consciousness. It would mean not being in relation to oneself, the essence of true selfhood. Such a pitfall in fact will always have the form of an all-consuming existential abyss given that it can devour the self only in totality. This could be called a kind of negative transubstantiation.

"The majority of men are curtailed 'I's; what was planned by nature as a possibility capable of being sharpened into an I is soon dulled into a third person."

The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard, trans. Alexander Dru

I speak of transubstantiation here because it'd be misleading to say that the self is reduced to nothing as soon as it's deprived of its selfhood. When we are not self-conscious we do not simply evaporate after all; although one could perhaps say that the existential significance of our own being has in fact evaporated in such moments. Instead we should be able to recognize that the relation which formerly constituted the self has simply been dissolved and that these disparate parts that the self was able to hold together in synthesis have likewise disintegrated into their previous states of being. In this sense one can even speak of things like experience and awareness without a self since these aspects of subjectivity, while intimately related to the concept of selfhood, still retain a sort of disorganized existence without it. Refer now to the above quoted passage and Kierkegaard's reference to becoming a third person. Without an actualized self, all the psychological aspects of a person are reduced to external realities in meaningless conflict with, and distanced from, other external realities. Selfhood then grounds all conceivable meaning that could be ascribed to them.

What is it though that allows the self to lose itself if such a loss is something that can only be decided by its own choices? Here we must introduce Kierkegaard's concept of despair. To use one of his own equations, despair is the disrelationship

that assumes the place of the relationship necessary to constitute the self. Obviously the pure absence of relation here would already exclude the possibility of any responsibility or choice (there is no predicament left then to existentially trouble anyone) so calling despair a disrelationship is an astute characterization. The finite and the infinite, as well as the other aspects synthesized in true selfhood, must in some sense be deliberately kept apart while at the same time this is occurring without a real consciousness of what they are. Such a consciousness would instantly bring them into a genuine relationship and this would inevitably actualize the awareness of self. They could only ever be things someone is conscious of if they were properly related to the one who was conscious of them for example – that person would then also have to be known. How can there be any deliberation without self-consciousness and so without consciousness itself? In this context we can answer that disrelationship is consciousness not of things as they are, which would involve a genuine relation, but things as they have been negatively transubstantiated into for the individual perceiving them. Just as a circus mirror can warp the refection of things so that they become unrecognizable, so too disrelationship is a mutilating transformation of its elements.

Despair then is always some form of unconsciousness. Fulfilled it must become the greatest unconsciousness imaginable and here we see why it is appropriate to describe despair as the sickness unto death. By death one means oblivion; the absence of all consciousness and any kind of chance for awakening – acknowledging also that it can be inferred that all forms of despair will be movements towards the ultimate realization of this. The sickness is always towards death and away from life. If it was towards life it wouldn't be a sickness would it? But one does not achieve a first person existence by leading oneself through a third person one. This then raises the added question of how the unconscious ground of despair can rise up to engulf consciousness even if it's a still self-conscious choice that is the very thing allowing this. To that end the three main forms of despair outlined by Kierkegaard provide an answer.

"Despair is a Sickness in the Spirit, in the Self, and So It May Assume a Triple Form: in Despair at Not Being Conscious of Having a Self (Despair Improperly So Called); in Despair at Not Willing to Be Oneself; in Despair at Willing to Be Oneself"

The Sickness unto Death, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong

In each of these, in despair where one lacks a sense of oneself as independent, in despair at refusing to be something, and in despair at wanting genuine self-realization, one is always in despair as a result of some sense of external imposition. Excuse my paraphrasing here but I believe it's justified and faithful to what Kierkegaard means. What he's saying is that the self can be corrupted in certain ways and that despair, the state of a diseased self, is something which reorients the self away from self-consciousness and the invigorating synthesis that is its true fulfillment. Note that in both mine and Kierkegaard's formulations, it's clear that despair is not a synthesis or relation between two things but a point of termination which the self by itself succumbs to. The one in despair then desires something but, finding in a finite effort no way to satisfy this desire, simply accedes to their defeat, accepting paralysis and their own oblivion. This is contrary to the one who has a self; who is truly committed to the synthesis of their own being and so is willing to respond to a sense of obstruction with further self-reflection in order to continue the process of self-relation. The one in despair conversely abandons self-relation at the point of perceived obstruction and so consigns themselves to a disrelational conclusion.

This also reveals why despair lacking a sense of oneself as independent is judged by Kierkegaard to be something improperly called despair. Not being conscious of having a self is a state equivalent to death in relation to selfhood, and despair is not itself death but a sickness unto death. The absence of consciousness in having a self, in having an independent and subjective reality, is rather the condition which both precedes despair and fulfills it. Just as death is equivalent to the state of not being born. Despair then is properly despair when there is some false consciousness of having a self, a false self – only one who is alive can be sick. And regarding the merits of despair, which Kierkegaard also speaks of, this is like the merits of pain in relation to a sickness – it awakens the afflicted to the injurious nature of their condition. The possibility of despair is also still grounded in some level of consciousness and so reveals at the very least a blind striving towards self-consciousness. In this the dialectical power of despair manifests itself – only in response to despair can we exert ourselves towards the higher synthesis that self-fulfillment demands since only despair can reveal its absence to us.

Despair at not willing to be oneself, despair in refusing to be something as I've characterized it and which is consistent with what Kierkegaard elaborates on

further (*to will to be rid of oneself*) is the first of the two true forms of despair listed. True because the possibility of the self has at least entered into the individual's awareness. So there is now something like a consciousness of not having a self that one accepts as oneself – not self-consciousness then but consciousness of a vacancy which would otherwise be filled by self-consciousness. The desire of the individual in this situation though is not explicitly the desire to become self-conscious but to merely be freed of a certain kind of existential incarceration. The individual is like someone who finds themselves trapped on an island and who hates the island but has no specific concept of where they'd actually prefer to go. Perhaps this individual cannot even imagine there are any other landmasses they could travel to. Likewise, being in despair at not willing to be oneself is a disrelation to one's own existential possibilities. One has not yet formed any positive concept of selfhood which one could try to aspire towards. Without the recognition of having a state of existential being that is one's own responsibility (not the circumstantial exterior aspects then so much as one's own prevailing interior relation to these) the individual is liable to consummate their disrelation as a predicament forced on them by fate. The individual absolves themselves of any responsibility for their personal condition – including their own feelings towards this. In such a state of despair then, one is in active resistance to the realization of one's own freedom.

A kind of inversion of the second form of despair is provided by the third one. Despair at willing to be oneself, at willing some genuine self-realization that seems beyond one's reach, is having an idea of a possible fulfilling realization of oneself for oneself – but this too then is still grounded in the renunciation of true existential responsibility. Fulfillment is now at least imagined but because of the form of fulfillment that is clung to (not just the end result since that need not be impossible where the means or method is the real source of inadequacy) it's still a refusal by the individual to own up to their own freedom. Instead of feeling fated to misery then, their misery has become something like an accident. If only the right moment had come along they could've become what they wanted to become! Or perhaps it was even worse and their realization of the self they wanted was simply too late. Regardless of which of these is the case, it's the nature of this kind of despair to have an image of a self. While in the second form of despair the self remains empty and the individual's disrelation is purely negative, in the third form of despair there is a phantom image inhabiting an abiding emptiness that nevertheless remains purely insubstantial. The phantom provides no fulfillment. In this state then, the

synthesis necessary to selfhood still hasn't been achieved – one does not have a relation to a sense of oneself as a self but rather one has a disrelationship to one's own individuality that's perpetuated by a relation to a concept of unrealized selfhood. As with all the other forms of despair, this is to define one's being by external realities and not by one's own personal choices. It remains a profound absence of true selfhood then.

"You die daily, not in the profound, earnest sense in which one usually understands these words, but life has lost its reality and you "Always count the days of your life from one termination-notice to the next." You let everything pass you by; nothing makes any impact. But then something suddenly comes along that grips you, an idea, a situation, a young girl's smile, and now you are "involved," for just on certain occasions you are not "involved," so at other times you are "at your service" in every way. Wherever there is something going on you join in. You behave in life as you usually do in a crowd. "You work yourself into the tightest group, see to it, if possible, to get yourself shoved up over the others so that you come to be above them, and as soon as you are up there you make yourself as comfortable as possible, and in this way you let yourself be carried through life." But when the crowd is gone, when the event is over, you again stand on the street corner and look at the world."

Either/Or Part II trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong

Having gone through the main ways in which despair indicates the failure to realize true selfhood, enough should have been covered now to outline Kierkegaard's definition of the self. Here a negative space provides the form of the thing. It's interesting to note though that being defined purely by another's existence is in fact the foundation of despair and of not having a self. Careful clarification is therefore called for here. The self is not defined by another but by its relation to another – the relation itself being its own relation, an expression of its subjectivity and individuality. In the crowd conversely we become part of the crowd and the very nature of a crowd excludes personal expression. As a song is drowned out when immersed in noise, so too the individuality of a person (their self) is negated by being immersed among many. Here it should be pointed out however that immersion is not constituted by simply being surrounded but rather by an involvement that identifies with a crowd and so abandons the fullness of its own personal existence for a part or component relation in a multitude. Since

multitudes of any kind naturally evolve in ways beyond one's own decisions, no true selfhood can be grounded in them. Among the many then the possibility of a self will just slowly drift away.

A synthesis, the basic form of realized selfhood, is first the synthesis of two factors. Of the finite and infinite. Neither the finite nor the infinite is the self though since, as Kierkegaard says explicitly, the self consists not in a mere relation of the finite and infinite but in the relation of that relation to its own self. The self synthesizes these two factors not by dissolving them in a dialectical unification but by preserving them within itself as two separate factors. In this way the factors are united subjectively rather than objectively. They aren't transformed into a single reality but rather they're brought together in the realization of a single relationship for them and in a continuous reflection on the relationship itself. In this way, the finitude of the finite perceived externally and the infinitude of the infinite perceived externally, are mirrored in the self and internally synthesized. But the self necessarily remains distinct from the factors it relates and the relationship itself since it must preserve a subjectivity which can still relate these to itself (the individual) Everything else is sickness.

The true self then is what it becomes with another to the extent that it does not become that other. A subjectivity that relates its subjectivity to and against objective contrasts. Here total fulfillment, total self-realization, depends on a relation to the infinite where it can define itself infinitely (comprehensively) As I mentioned earlier, at the very least then, in order to realize minimal selfhood, one has to have some concept of the infinite to relate one's own existence to. Directly, this is the nature of one's own freedom – indirectly, this is the will towards something desired which, however imperfectly perceived, is situated in a response to eternity. What is truly desirable after all is a desire that would hold true forever, regardless of the forces of time and the chaos of circumstance. A self which has in any way realized such a desire can be said to have fulfilled itself because it has grounded its own existence in something beyond all decay and upheaval. A true self then has been achieved through finding a self that is not ultimately contingent on external considerations. It is genuine individuality and not merely the illusion of individuality that can arise due to ephemeral involvements. It is therefore also involving oneself in something absolutely beyond the world, so that one won't find oneself staring out vacantly from some street corner once all the parades and traffic of the world have passed by.

What is Kierkegaard's definition of a self? It is an attitude. It is a commitment to the fulfillment of the existential potential we find within ourselves. Since such a condition will always have its origins in a state of ignorance, and since even its own concept of its selfhood can't ever be fully illuminated prior to its own fulfillment, this attitude can only be authentically grounded in faith. When anyone aspires to a thing without certainty, they are making a decision that inevitably expresses some level of faith. True selfhood then is embracing the infinite even without an exhaustive knowledge of it (which is impossible) and so making a leap to faith. But this is not fundamentally different than any action where uncertainty is present. What is desired is pursued not because it offers something certain but because it's desired. The self too is an uncertainty.

GENTLY CUPPING THE FIREFLIES

An Essay on the Art of Haiku

Every good haiku is first and foremost an epiphany. The poetry here lies in depicting a moment of sudden insight and doing so with the greatest possible clarity. The challenge as such involves capturing the details needed to express one's own experience while doing this within an absolute economy of language. But achieving that is, in itself, only enough to create a good haiku – to master the art of haiku one has to go further and cultivate an extremely discriminating power of understanding. One can for example take any observation or experience and turn it into a haiku while still not expressing much of real significance. Not only must the true artist here be exceptionally selective then but, in haiku, as in all other arts, the genius of the artist consists in the transformative nature of their work.

The old pond!
A frog leaps…
Splash!

- Basho

On a withered branch –
Fleeting memories of
Cicada's singing

- Kagai

While the art of haiku is grounded in a kind of empiricism that often concerns itself with experience, the belief that good haiku are traditionally limited to, or strive after, some purely representational ideal is quite clearly wrong. Even Basho's most famous haiku about a frog simply jumping into a pond has an undertone of irreverence to it and an implicit symbolic tension between the staid nature of the pond and Basho's initial reaction to this, a kind of contentment with calm and order, versus the frog's interrupting leap, which in turn was the result of the frog presumably reacting to Basho's own intrusion. Now the poem of course can be analyzed and overanalyzed in many ways but the point here is that haiku is not a superficial art preoccupying itself with the mere surface of the natural or human world. It is concerned rather with an intimate and holistic reaction to the world as the poet experiences it in an engaged manner. So, to use another good example, Kagai's poem where he reminisces about cicadas while staring at a bare tree has the poet focusing on figments of their own imagination. At the same time though this is still empirically grounded because it remains a kind of self-focused observation – it captures the poet's own mental reaction to elements in the natural world. The art of haiku then is not centered in things, pictures, sensations, etc, but moments. Specifically the subjectively explicit moment preserved by a writer's artistic talent. As in other forms of literature though, the value of this subjectivity resides in the fact that all people have, to some degree, an underlying common nature which allows them to appreciate the subjective experiences of others. In fact, language in general can only have social impact to the extent that what is actually expressed from this or that subjective viewpoint in fact contains something objectively true within it that is accessible for other subjective viewpoints. People can only share what is mutually congruent and the art of haiku, dealing as it so often does with primal or basic experiences, including both the ordinary and extraordinary but always in some relation to fundamental aspects of life, is so powerful for the same reason that it is so accessible. This is what unites the various concerns in the art of haiku – here one sees for example that the lack of ornamental language and the emphasis on direct-experience over pure artistic invention are vital precisely because what is fundamental is necessarily omnipresent. Through the elimination of superfluous complexity then, whether in style, theme, or whatever, the writer of a haiku best addresses the universal.

Wonderful!
And wonderful!
The spring this dawn

- Ryoto

Oh! It's all I can say
Atop the blossoming
Hills of Yoshino

- Teishitsu

This furthermore disproves any claim that in order for haiku to be good they must be limited to the concrete. In Ryoto's excellent poem about the spring dawn for example, the universality of the experience he is capturing is itself grounded in abstractness – and he conveys this so well by the very absence of a concrete image. Instead he expresses the joyful spirit of spring in its purest form – to add any concrete details here would be unnecessarily ornamental. For this reason also I disagree with criticisms like those directed at Teishitsu's poem on Yoshino which disparage it on account of the fact that all its elements aren't mutually dependent – that one could for example exchange Yoshino with various other places and still have a functioning poem. This seems like a perverse objection to me. One could likewise replace the frog in Basho's pond with a muskrat or Kagai's cicada with a bird and you've similarly altered these poems. Through such manipulations you could even change the overall meaning of various haiku but this is possible with so many of them that the convictions behind the criticism here are invalidated if only because the criteria they demand are unfeasible. Besides that, the simple experience of being in awe before the natural beauty of a specific place is an easily relatable experience but one that cannot be better conveyed by the idiosyncrasies of location. The real question here then is whether or not the experience itself is a worthwhile subject matter – and given that being in awe at the natural world is as profound a poetic experience as any other, the answer is yes it is.

Raising a well bucket
In the dawn –
A floating camellia

- Kakei

The art of haiku really consists in giving voice to a haiku spirit which is independent of mere words. Haiku is about the meaningfulness that can be found across the whole range of experience providing only that one makes an effort to cultivate appreciation. Meaning here is discovered by the active pursuit of it without contrivance – that is to say, without trying to force meaning from our experiences. Again, this is why haiku tend towards such simplicity and why it is a popular art form even among those who have no real intellectual appreciation of it beyond the traditional three-line and 5-7-5 syllable structure. This is not to say though that haiku can't be sophisticated but merely that in the spirit of haiku any sophistication will be an open and accessible sophistication. What is contrary to the spirit of haiku are those kinds of sophistication which impede interpretation via jargon, idiosyncrasy, etc. Likewise, universality here does not reside in the experiences themselves but how the poet is affected in a given moment. As someone who can't recall ever drawing water from a well, I can nevertheless enjoy the wonderful tranquility and beauty of Kakei raising a bucket one morning and being surprised at a floating camellia. My appreciation in this case stems from the fact that I can imaginatively transpose myself to a similar situation and, in doing so, enjoy the moment vicariously. It is this commonality which characterizes haiku and why it success as an art form depends on minimalism. The words here are merely a door to experience – beyond this they would simply get in the way.

The fact is that words can crush the very feelings and ideas they're trying to express. Which is not to say that rhetorical simplicity is an absolute ideal which should be imposed on all forms of language. Even though I personally have a strong bias towards accessible language, I can still appreciate the fact that a work like Finnegan's Wake is deliberately crafted to induce a sort of meritorious convolution – Joyce after all is trying to capture the quality of dreaming and so is astute to employ a style that mirrors the nebulous and symbolically-layered world of dreams. Haiku are different however for the reasons already provided, for their different aspirations, and so rightfully dispose of stylistic elaborations. And while violent

events or subjects can make excellent haiku, still there is always an attention to the delicacy of the moment – either in the constituent elements themselves or in one's own moment of clarity. Moments after all are always falling apart, effortlessly and endlessly, and it is only within specific moments that the spirit of haiku can achieve its fullest realization. The person who succeeds in writing haiku is like someone who wanders a summer night catching fireflies with bare hands, being careful not to hurt them, and then basking in the soft light when they open these.

To appreciate haiku likewise requires genuine concern and sensitivity. Haiku are portals to aesthetic moments which, like all literary forms, require for their appreciation a corresponding act of imagination from their readers. No haiku can succeed for the individual who is unwilling to engage in the task of imaginatively placing themselves in the moment the poet has chosen to introduce. For some poems this is admittedly easier than others but the easiness here should not be the criterion by which the merits of said haiku are judged – the accessibility previously mentioned as essential to any excellence in the art of haiku is definitely not accessibility tailored to the intellectually lazy. Rather it is simply that the haiku should be more or less self-contained, granting only that the reader has basic literacy. When a haiku uses allusions, and many good haiku do with respect to geography and history and literature, they are not allusions particular to professional levels of knowledge in said areas. Since individual knowledge varies arbitrarily in regards to different subjects, it furthermore makes no sense to assess the merits of particular haiku by their ease of appreciation. Instead, regardless of the effort required to understand this or that haiku, one does better to value haiku by the outcome of their appreciation and not the challenge of appreciating them.

The piercing chill –
Our room when she lived,
Her comb under my bare heel

- Buson

I fell ill
As peonies bloomed,
Reviving to chrysanthemums

- Shiki

Two contrasting examples will illustrate what I mean here. A very famous haiku by Buson and one of his best, is one where he describes an instance of accidentally stepping on his wife's comb after she's passed away. Now the feeling of the poem and its powerful imagery are quite easily appreciated. It has no ambiguity. It requires no analysis. It is simply straightforward poetry at its most excellent. However, consider the following poem now by Shiki in which he wakes up after an illness and finds that chrysanthemums have replaced the peonies originally adorning his room. If someone has no familiarity with the symbolic association of chrysanthemums with death in Japanese culture, this poem will seem rather banal – once that's appreciated though then the ironic implications of this haiku become clear. That the poem requires some knowledge of Japanese culture neither detracts nor enhances its value – it's simply a prerequisite to understanding in this case. Shiki of course was relying on common knowledge in his own culture and so he can't be accused of anything like a deliberate act of esotericism; something which would in fact diminish the value of a haiku since it's contrary to the general spirit of the art. Given that the aesthetic appreciation of anything, be it literature or painting or nature itself, depends on the initiative of the audience to want to appreciate what is presented to them, haiku can only achieve anything of real meaning if they are specifically written for sincere and capable audiences. That is to say, people who want meaningful and transformative content. Nothing truly great or wonderful can be made for people who are apathetic to such experiences or who lack the basic means to appreciate them.

A rock
Looming large
Against the full moon

- Seisensui

Touched by spring rain
Everything grows
Beautiful

- Chiyo-Ni

The simplicity of many haiku meanwhile, including famous poems by various masters, can lull a person into believing that the haiku form is a largely artless kind of art. That this conviction is prevalent can be attested to by the fact that so many enthusiastic amateurs are prepared to shovel any impression at all into the three-line 5-7-5 structure and call it a haiku. Admittedly this is an inevitable consequence of haiku being a minimalist art with a great potential for subtlety so it doesn't need to be dwelled on. That said, to properly appreciate haiku one needs to be able to distinguish the merits in the simplest works of the masters from the vacuous efforts produced by so many unskilled but self-assured dilettantes. A pair of examples should suffice here and for these I will begin with Seisensui's haiku in which the moon and a rock are juxtaposed. Granting that no underlying symbolism has been left out of my interpretation of the poem, the haiku's merits I think rest on its clarity and formal contrast. But the reader has to actually try and picture the scene to appreciate it. They have to imagine viewing the moon from such an angle that a rock actually intrudes on it, as well as the round luminous form of the moon contrasted with a dim jagged rock in the foreground. Admittedly the poem is very sparse but this absence of detail is part of its value – additional content would've detracted from what this particular poem managed to achieve. Anyone who enjoys Rothko's paintings should have no problem understanding that minimalism has value in and of itself but, to rely on a less elitist example, consider Buzz Aldrin's words when he first stepped on the moon. Magnificent desolation. What Seisensui invokes then is something like the beauty of the desert, and this can only be fulfilled by keeping the poem devoid of clutter. Another good example here, but for quite different reasons, is the haiku by Chiyo-Ni in which she exhorts us to consider the ameliorating effects of spring rain. While the poem can be partly interpreted as a tribute to spring's vivifying powers, the "everything" being referred to places more of an emphasis on the visual aftereffects of the spring rain itself. In contrast to the geometric chiaroscuro conveyed by my interpretation of Seisensui's poem, Chiyo-Ni's haiku as rendered here is so abstract that it invokes no specific environment. But what this does is it allows us to ponder the entirety of our own personal memories of what spring rain can do to transform the natural world in terms of

gleaming scattered light. Also the use of the word “touch” here is key since this suggests the passing of gentle perspiration, likely in the dawn and hence with dawn light, which contributes to an overall sense of splendor and tranquility. So despite the lack of detail or dramatic scenario in either haiku, they succeed in providing us with direct access to vivid and poignant experiences – exactly what the art of haiku aspires to.

A paulownia leaf,
Without wind,
Falling

- Boncho

Just let go –
Don’t the petals
Also fall like that?

- Issa

Not spring, not autumn –
Nothing can touch the heights
Of Mount Fuji

- Baishitsu

To summarize the continuum of haiku mastery that has been laid out now, I would emphasize a sort of non-exclusive but polarized relationship here between naturalism and symbolism. One can also refer to this in terms of denotation and connotation but either way, mastery of haiku consists in a poem conveying fundamental insights in one or both of these dimensions. This becomes most evident in haiku dealing with exactly the same worldly things that nevertheless divide sharply along these lines. For example, the poem by Boncho in which he fixes his attention on a falling paulownia leaf represents something close to a distilled naturalism – interpreted here it conveys only the serenity in a moment of pure

observation. Now, compare this to Issa's wonderful haiku where he employs the falling of leaves in a solicitous analogy for how a person should live. Here the abstractness of the poem, beyond its already explicit statement of symbolism, entails that it achieves nothing with respect to naturalistic criteria. This subsequently shows us the independence of both these aspects in great haiku. And as for poems that combine both, one can consider Baishitsu's haiku on Mount Fuji which succeeds at suggesting magnificent imagery while also carrying within it philosophically substantive implications. All this goes to show is that the art of haiku is not just a venerable literary form but furthermore one whose enduring vitality will continue to provide for future creative expression.

How then can the art of haiku be sustained and advanced? First of all, by reading great haiku writers. But that of course depends on publishing haiku and cultivating both demand and supply – that is to say, new readers and new writers. In all these though the prevalence of the spirit of haiku is essential. Of what then does such a spirit consist? Quite simply it is no more than living in the spirit of devotion, regardless of whether that consists in an actual connection to the world or whether it is merely in the reading of literature. Both situations however demand a purity of heart and mind in order to grasp what is of value. In fact, mastery itself only depends on the totality of one's own self-subordination. Or, to use a less menacing word perhaps, one's humility. Haiku are about giving oneself freely to a moment, without anxiety, without distraction. Here both the poet and their readers can drink from an endless well of epiphany. Once the art of haiku is poured out for us it never diminishes. What this shows us is that the art of haiku is not just a pastime to be enjoyed in a kind of compartmental way. No. The art of haiku enhances the art of life itself.

HEIDEGGER'S TURN
Die Kehre

Despite his work being dismissed as completely worthless by some of his earliest English language commentators, the status of Martin Heidegger as one of the major, and most original, philosophers of the twentieth century is assured now. However, due in large perhaps to his use of neologisms and an idiosyncratic writing style, he still remains one of the more difficult thinkers to interpret. For this essay then I intend to focus only on a single pivotal moment in Heidegger's philosophical development - something that has come to be known as "The Turn" or "Die Kehre". An appreciation of this will obviously depend on obtaining an understanding of what Heidegger was trying to accomplish before his apparent change in course and so I'll say some things about that first. Heidegger was a student of the philosopher Edmund Husserl and a practitioner of the latter's "phenomenological" approach. In short, this amounts to a careful consideration of the individual's direct experience of the world and the elimination of, ideally, all forms of unjustified presupposition. So explanations of reality which rely on concepts like "causality", "subject" and other inherited metaphysical ideas are abandoned in favor of a more descriptive method of proceeding.

Heidegger used this approach to great effect and, while he was already arriving at significant conclusions independent of the framework Husserl had set down, his first major book "Being and Time", still considered his magnum opus, remains faithful to the general spirit of phenomenology. Soon though he underwent a radical conversion in how he thought philosophy needed to proceed and this began with a reassertion of the unique and important value of history. Phenomenology is by definition ahistorical – it eliminates historical considerations

in favor of a kind of Cartesian search for pure intellectual foundations (And one of Husserl's last works was actually called the Cartesian Meditations) so clearly if history has an irreducible and powerful influence in any of our philosophical predicaments, pure phenomenology becomes inadequate.

"The Turn" therefore represents something like a return to the spirit of historically oriented philosophizing perhaps best exemplified by Heidegger's German predecessor Hegel. But rather than affirming history as the expression of truth unfolding in a dialectical manner, the Hegelian interpretation, it seems that Heidegger here is more concerned with liberating the individual from history. I suspect that Heidegger would approve of the statement James Joyce made when he wrote "*History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake*." Supporting evidence for this fact will be found if we consider two of Heidegger's biggest preoccupations after "The Turn" – poetry and technology.

Here I should confess that I'm deliberately going beyond the exposition of Heidegger's own stated ideas towards something more speculative in nature. I think that by doing so however I'll genuinely illuminate the essence of Heidegger's own concerns. At the risk of oversimplifying things, I believe that it's nevertheless clear enough that poetry and technology represent two primarily opposite kinds of being. To make the contrast more explicit, and to remove some of their irrelevant commonalities, it might be helpful to think of the contrast in terms of Vitality and Machinery. The spirit of poetry is something that invests itself in the direct appreciation of being and in the search for new insights at every level of possible awareness. Poetry has no limits in its subject matter and so it can revitalize our perception of the entire world. This then explains Heidegger's statement that "*The poets are the vanguard of a changed conception of Being*."

Technology to the contrary, while an inevitable historical development, nevertheless threatens to mechanize thought and culture in general through its own pervasiveness – to reduce thinking to something like unimaginative obedience. This is by definition incapable of radical creativity (since pre-existing forms of rationality and logic must always proceed from some set of established premises or axioms) The danger then is the danger of becoming like the machine because of the omnipresence of the machine. Of course, to be fair to the actual creators of technology, that's obviously not their intention but, at the same time,

their lack of intention here cannot be considered sufficient to dismiss Heidegger's concerns in this context.

All systems of thought have some degree of opposition to creative thinking. A system necessarily sets limits on what can or should be allowed. This is the reason I think Heidegger is so sympathetic to poetic individuals like Nietzsche and Holderlin, individuals who think outside established systems of thought and who profoundly oppose them – as such gaining a better access to Being in something like a primordial truthfulness. Likewise, I can mention Heidegger's concept of "*Destruktion*" here as an example of his desire to liberate people to a greater authenticity by destroying ideas that have historically conditioned the present state of inauthenticity. It should also be noted that Heidegger doesn't regard this state as prevailing throughout history. His later historical concerns in fact claim a positive counterexample in the Pre-Socratic philosophers of Ancient Greece. These individuals represent a manner of thinking opposed to the inauthenticity that confronts us. Again, this sort of direct engagement with being in general and the individual's being (Called *Dasein* or *Being-There* by Heidegger) is what animates and serves as the focus in the best kinds of poetry.

Poetry demands thinking, and thinking for oneself, whereas technology, in the form of commodity, can supplant thinking and lull us into an essentially thoughtless existence. The threat then is of technology as a kind of ideological value, whereby second hand ideas come to be regarded as having higher value than thinking for oneself, for concerning oneself with the questions of being in general and one's own being. To offer up two more Heidegger quotes here, Heidegger says "*To dwell is to garden*" and "*Transcendence is selfhood*" Interpreting "dwelling" as the state of Being-There, of authentic consciousness, I'd say that the former quote is emphasizing the need for us to cultivate our own intellectual well-being in something like an existentialist manner. For Heidegger, this would mean arriving at an authenticity of self through the recognition of oneself as being. This then leads into the second quote, where I think he's saying that one's own selfhood, or real self-awareness, demands a tireless engagement with the state of one's own being and the self-improvement that this generates. So basically, transcending one's own various degrees of ignorance.

Naturally this is a very challenging philosophical demand being made of us. It's not something that can be addressed in a single afternoon of armchair

speculation. To the contrary, it's something that the most intelligent and morally serious of us would still have to devote our entire lives to. Authenticity cannot be perfected in some finite period of authenticity; rather it requires a total devotion to the ideal of our authenticity throughout the whole of our existence. It's essentially a moral predicament deliberately reached through epistemological inquiry. And yet Heidegger himself says "*The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking."* As thought provoking as that may be though, it should not come as a surprise that this is a difficult reality for many people to acknowledge. To stay inauthentic requires no energy or commitment. To turn ourselves towards some new understanding conversely is something truly momentous.

INFALLIBILITY IN WITTGENSTEIN's "ON CERTAINTY"

"It would be completely misleading to say: "I believe my name is L.W." And this too is right: I cannot be making a mistake about it. But that does not mean that I am infallible about it."

Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe

Wittgenstein makes the preceding remarks in the entry 425 of his book On Certainty. The book was one of the last things he wrote and can be recognized as a guide that's as good as any to his beliefs regarding the questions it encompasses. The general philosophical concern behind these is how knowledge is possible in the face of radical skepticism and also how skepticism itself can be justified. Or isn't justified. Here for instance, he is saying that it makes no sense to speak of making a mistake regarding what one's own name is. Why though?

After all, we can imagine many scenarios in which the names we think are ours aren't really ours. And not just in the sense that our actual legal name is different from the one our parents told us was ours or something like that. We can also imagine situations where we are suffering from amnesia and end up making a wrong inference about what our name is. Or someone might even experience a dream where they think they have an insight about what their name actually is for all sorts of possible reasons. Consider for example a possible schizophrenic break with reality. While Wittgenstein doesn't mention any of these contexts specifically, I think he was already acknowledging them generally with his reference to the fact that he isn't infallible even with respect to his own name. But then he says that he

can’t be mistaken either. What does he mean by this? At first glance it might seem like only an either-or judgement can be valid.

What I think Wittgenstein has zeroed in on though, and quite profoundly at that, is the fact that falsity and error are not perfectly congruent. That arriving at false conclusions is not always the result of our making an intellectual error. If that doesn’t immediately strike you as an extraordinary insight, please consider its implications because they go directly to the heart of the nature of epistemology and undermine a lot of assumptions that’ve been made there by humanity’s best minds over the centuries. As radical as we can acknowledge Cartesian skepticism to be for instance, the idea that truth or reality can be so elusive as to possibly transcend the limits of our own powers and responsibility is something far more startling and revolutionary.

I think Wittgenstein speaks correctly when he says that he cannot make a mistake in this sense regarding his own name. What is really interesting though is why that’s the case. In order to appreciate it, try and imagine by what means a person should establish for themselves what their name is. As already mentioned, one can conjure up all sorts of incredible scenarios in order to raise doubts about what their true name is. In fact one can conjure an endless supply of skeptical arguments here and because of that it’s impossible to be infallible in this context. Think about it; one’s own name is now beyond absolute proof. Because even with a criterion where one could banish the most powerful skeptical arguments, the sheer infinitude of arguments makes disproving them all impossible. As an analogy here, imagine a scenario where a person is supposed to check and make sure that every sunflower seed on a moving conveyer belt of sunflower seeds is less than a meter long. Suppose one has a perfectly reliable meter stick which one can employ here. Because sunflower seeds are so small, one does not even need to check carefully to ascertain that any sunflower seed is less than a meter but, if there is no end to the number of sunflower seeds to measure, then even something this obvious is impossible to establish absolutely. Remember that each skeptical argument, even if it’s logically equivalent to some other skeptical argument, would still have to be evaluated in order to ascertain that. So every argument would still have to be checked individually. The task then is impossible.

Given that impossibility though, there can be no logical requirement for us to invalidate every possible form of skepticism which could be raised with respect

to the status of our name. We cannot be in error then simply because we didn't first eliminate various possibilities within a range of speculation. This is why we can't be mistaken here but also why we're not simultaneously infallible as a result of there being no possibility for mistakes. That certain skeptical arguments are of a kind which places them beyond the range of what we have to address in order to claim a normal confidence in them as facts, does not alter the reality that said skeptical arguments encompass actual possibilities. It would be absurd after all if we said that we only believed that our names were what we perceive them to be. That our names were merely hypotheses that we entertained. No. If we can have confidence in any knowledge, said knowledge must include our own names.

"May not the thing that I recognize with complete certainty as the tree that I have seen my whole life long – may this not be disclosed as something different? May it not confound me?"

Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe

This excerpt was taken from the same entry as the last one and here we see Wittgenstein raising the same doubts as earlier but now not simply in a nominal way. While the name of anyone or anything is arbitrary, the nature of a tree is not. However, at what point are we justified in asserting that something is really a tree and not something else. In a certain sense I don't think much justification is required here. If I am walking in a park in broad daylight for example and I see something clearly and it looks like a tree, like the thousands of other trees that I've seen in my life, then I think I'm justified in believing that it's a tree and in making any similarly ordinary references. If the nature of what I take to be a tree is somehow called into question though by another person or some experience then of course, at that point, there are steps I can take to test whether it is in fact a tree or not. But unless something brings the status of the tree into question there's no justification for me to be skeptical here. Outside of exceptional circumstances, skepticism in this regard would be obscene since it's far less justifiable than merely taking things for granted. A true skeptic after all should apply their skepticism to itself to delimit the appropriate application of said skepticism. And while, in a philosophical context, I can speculate on whether anything is really a tree, even this would not give me a good reason to go up to every tree with an axe and swing at it a few times in order to make sure there's actually a tree in there. Because there's no way I could practice this kind of inquiry consistently. Where would it end? One

could spend one's whole life on a beach for instance making sure that every grain of sand didn't contain a tiny sleeping leprechaun.

"Then why don't I simply say with Moore "I know that I am in England"? Saying this is meaningful in particular circumstances, which I can imagine. But when I utter the sentence outside those circumstances, as an example to show that I can know truth of this kind with certainty, then it at once strikes me as fishy – Ought it to?"

Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe

Moving backwards again through the text, to entry 423, it appears that Wittgenstein is clearly aware that there is good reason to dispense with any skeptical considerations with respect to some kinds of straightforward assertions. When he mentions particular circumstances with respect to asserting that one knows one is in England, I imagine he's referring to situations like finding oneself coming ashore by boat and, with a map in hand, observing certain features of unfamiliar coastal terrain but then seeing that these correspond to the map which one has complete confidence in. He hesitates though to commit himself as Moore does to philosophical certainty on that account. Saying one is sure one is in England while standing next to Buckingham Palace for example seems less justifiable oddly enough. In accordance with the previous remarks just made on trees though, it appears clear that the lack of justification here is precisely because of the context in which the assertion is being made.

If one is standing outside Buckingham Palace then one cannot have any practical doubts about where one is in normal circumstances. But then the doubt, and equally here any assertion to the contrary, can only be meaningfully made in some philosophical sense. In precisely such a sense though one cannot be certain that one is in England because now the horizon of one's doubts have been expanded to include the infinitude of philosophical skepticism. So as one's context delimits things more obviously, questions of truth and falsity become more radical and, therefore, less open to certainty. There is an inverse relation here between the legitimacy of asserting a belief in anything and the obviousness of things in the context one asserts it in. By making an assertion in a context where various interpretations of that assertion make its conclusion transparently true or false, the assertion can only retain any meaning if the context is given greater and more radical philosophical scope. We can call this principle the Principle of Inverse

Meaning: the meaning of a statement becomes more contingent on philosophical justification where other interpretations can be simultaneously excluded as a result of the obvious truth or falsity said interpretations would imply. Because to assert something obvious is pointless and therefore meaningless. As such then, obvious assertions only have meaning when they are introduced with philosophical intentions deep enough to merit them.

I don't mean to say that Wittgenstein is advocating anything like this criterion here but its merits have occurred to me just now as I was writing this and it seems in line with his own thoughts. We can apply it for example in relation to his position on infallibility and this seems to do a good job of putting things in order. One cannot be philosophically infallible because philosophy is always a kind of teleological suspension of knowledge (I think Wittgenstein would be fine with this modulation of Kierkegaard's phrase) and that is why infallibility about one's own name makes no sense – because doubt here can only be of the deepest philosophical kind. In an ultimate philosophical sense then we can have no certainty about our names. Or anything else for that matter because the red carpet of philosophical skepticism doesn't end. We can keep rolling it out as far as we're willing to entertain doubts.

It must be equally true though that there is no such thing as a philosophical mistake. For a mistake to occur some established criterion must be transgressed and said criteria can only exist in so far as philosophy has been suspended and certain assumptions made. Even our most logically constructed criteria, the best and strongest ones imaginable, will always be the products of finite effort and so won't have been tested against every possible philosophical skepticism. Therefore assigning the status of a mistake to any action will depend on the extent that some logical system has arbitrarily satisfied itself with a finite amount of philosophical self-testing – leaving of course an infinite amount of philosophical testing left untried. We cannot be infinitely mistaken though, only finitely mistaken.

In as much as we truly aspire to knowledge, we must make ourselves responsible to the truth – but still we can never be more responsible than the basic limits of our own powers allow.

MODERNISM RECONSIDERED

Introduction

Certain words and concepts seem to have a special talent for eluding the public's understanding. Irony is the most obvious example of this. I've noticed recently however that modernism is being similarly misused in a wide variety of contexts so I've decided to write this essay to define what it means to be modern. At issue is the fact that the effects of modernism occurred during significantly different time periods for different areas of human endeavor. For example, the modernization of science transpired over two hundred years before literature was modernized. Likewise, philosophy, architecture, music, and every other aspect of human activity subject to evolution, have all had their own individual periods of transformation. Obviously there have to be basic commonalities between all these events, otherwise it wouldn't make sense to group them together under a single concept, but because they're so different from one another in many cases, the consequences of modernity were naturally unique for each of them. What they all share though, what truly defines modernism, is a fundamental shift in human perspective that took hold and which eventually went on to express itself in all our outlets for creativity.

It had to begin somewhere. Or rather, it had to establish itself somewhere first before it could start to spread. When we are looking for the origins of any cultural movement we are generally trying to ascribe it to a specific individual or group – at the same time, there will almost always be other people in the historical record who made similar or identical achievements earlier. This often results in trivial debates over priority. The solution here is to recognize that, while the

originators of cultural movements are likely to have predecessors who achieved similar things, the genuine originators are those from whom the initial momentum of a cultural movement can be traced. For example, let's take existentialism. Usually, Kierkegaard is recognized as the founder of existentialism. What gives Kierkegaard this status is not simply the fact that he developed many of the concepts central to existentialism but that he provided the immediate stimuli for an existential awakening. Although we might look back to an earlier figure like Pascal for instance as exemplifying existentialism to some extent, we should still recognize that it was the published works of Kierkegaard which initiated existentialism as a significant intellectual trend – the major figures of existentialism routinely refer back to Kierkegaard in addressing existentialist issues in a way Kierkegaard himself doesn't with respect to Pascal. The origins of a cultural movement then can be compared to a pot of water boiling – we don't say that the pot is boiling when the first bubble appears but rather when the whole pot starts going. The question also is one of identifying causality.

The Origins of Modernism

Returning to modernism now, we can narrow our search for its inception by identifying what it was initially being contrasted with. That is to say, what exactly isn't modern? Of course the medieval period and medieval thought offer us examples of things that aren't modern but that wasn't the traditional point of divide. Rather it was the ancient civilizations of the Greeks and Romans who were the source of contrast. Since their increased appreciation following the dawn of the Renaissance, the ancients in the opinions of 16th century Europe had been elevated to the status of paragons with respect to intellectual achievement. They represented the highest level of human greatness although, just as soon as this was the case, progress began to erode the prevailing consensus. At the start of the 17th century, Francis Bacon published his *Advancement of Learning* which inverted the relationship between the ancient and existing world by arguing that him and his contemporaries were the true ancients since they in fact represented an older perspective. This was only a prelude though.

It wasn't until Descartes published his *Discourse on Method* roughly thirty years later that modernism was finally given an established form. Bacon observed, and represented in his own work, a liberation from the submission to the ancients

as authoritative, but what Descartes did was further consolidate this independence through the invention of a new methodology. As I will try to show, what defines modernism from here on out is always some manner of technical innovation and program. Cartesian skepticism qualifies for this because unlike previous forms of skepticism, it provided a criterion from which further inferences could be obtained. Previous incarnations of skepticism were largely opinions, attitudes, etc. In short, they were stances in relation to specific questions. Cartesian skepticism was general in its scope but specific enough in its formulation to become an instrument of continued application. Unlike an ancient skeptic like Cratylus who formulated his skepticism simply to arrive at a conclusion – Descartes invented a way of thinking which could be utilized for arriving at new discoveries.

Modernism in Ascendency

Because philosophy provides the immediate intellectual foundations for our personal relationship to ideas and experience, it's predictable that fundamental shifts in perspective would start there. Before any method exists or law has been ascertained we'll usually have to consider things with an open imagination, and so, purely philosophically. Philosophy pursued in sincerity however arrives at the recognition of logical necessities and so it soon leads to science. Accordingly, the next area of human endeavor where modernism took root was in humanity's investigation of the natural world. Nearing the end of the 17th century, Isaac Newton published his *Principia Mathematica* and the systemization of the physical universe began. That a wide variety of natural phenomena could now be explained by reference to a few relatively simple principles demonstrates another defining aspect of modernity – the tendency towards reductionism. But this shouldn't be equated with merely ascribing order to things since modernism is just as much a disruption of existing systems of order as it is a replacement of them with new systems. Reductive modernizing invariably followed the completion of modern analyses – a survey of the actual landscape so to speak prior to the construction of a city on top of it. And this is precisely what science did, succeeding so spectacularly that the entire world was consumed by it.

Modernism in science led directly to social modernization in the form of industrialization. Here too the principles of reductionism were imposed, in this case for adapting human beings to the pressing needs of industry. Just as modernism

emphasized the functionality of an idea in methodological terms, so too it prevailed in redefining individual human beings. In effect, it reduced them to subordinate functions within a higher system, undermining the long established significance of the individual human being as a unique spiritual reality. Technology furthermore gives us the paradigm of modernism distilled into its essence – in the omnivorous absorption of natural resources and the destructive transmutation of these into reiterative products we find both the modernist tendency to re-evaluate everything and the subsequent tendency to take the raw material left from this and repurpose it in an optimized, and therefore repetitive, manner. Modernism as such was a rejection of the natural world that the ancients never envisioned – modernism then meant the artificial improvement of all aspects of human existence, even the environment itself. Clearly this impetus explains both the extraordinary benefits the modern world has produced as well as its negative consequences.

Modernism Culminates and Disintegrates

The zenith of modernism actually took place in the middle of the 19th century. A mathematician named George Boole published a book in 1847 titled *The Mathematical Analysis of Logic*, and by doing so he introduced a new rigor to the processes of thought itself. Modern logic, as it's called, exceeds its traditional Aristotelian predecessor in the scope of its formalizations. Whereas previously only basic logical relationships like syllogisms could be formulated, modern logic allowed its practitioners to encompass vastly greater complexity and modalities; through concise symbolic representations as well. The specifics aren't relevant to a discussion of modernism generally but, suffice it to say, another area of human inquiry was incorporated into the ever enlarging modernist expanse. Soon however, what modernism tried to absorb started to prove itself resistant to the previously invincible progress that'd been underway for centuries.

What finally brought the advance of modernism to a halt were the arts. It's not that modernism made no progress in the arts, it's that these progressions all proved to be incomplete and unstable. As I've said already, modernism was grounded in a two-fold process – the removal of traditional systems of order and their replacement with newly optimized systems. In the arts, only the first of these was accomplished with any success. We see this most conspicuously in painting where technical innovations like those devised by the impressionists precipitated

further experiments in technique until nothing was left of the traditional fidelity to nature that structured painting (despite the longstanding presence of the supernatural which did simmer in the techniques of some painters like El Greco for example) Likewise, the technical progress made in writing and music, where works such as those by e.e. cummings and Igor Stravinsky respectively broke down the barriers in their own artistic fields, did not lead to the reestablishment of any new order but rather only to a continuous overwhelming of previous limitations. In this way, all our earlier values have been reduced to arbitrary positions. But this also hints at the reason why the arts, specifically painting and literature, were the most resilient in the face of modernism and, as such, why they were the last to be modernized. Their existing limitations were expansive enough to contain human aspiration a while longer. Philosophy and science modernized earlier conversely because their existing limitations quickly proved themselves inadequate.

Modernism and Post-Modernism

Given how modernism has been redefined so far, I think that the concept of post-modernism must also be redefined. If modernism means reductionism and systemization then post-modernism means giving in to the perception of a radical disunity present in the world. In this sense, and only in this sense, we can cautiously refer to the epistemological difficulties that have arisen from quantum mechanics as post-modern events. In the face of Einstein's attempts at total systemization, the discoveries of quantum mechanics showed that such a system was impossible within the limits established by modernity. Similarly, the aesthetic ideals that modernism tried to affirm in the arts simply fell apart as a result of this influence and since then the subjectivity of personal opinion has largely prevailed. It's interesting to note that the influence of post-modernism seems proportional to the extent of formality in a given field – in highly structured disciplines like logic and science for example, post-modernism barely has any presence, whereas in areas of human activity with minimal structure, like the arts, post-modernism thrives.

Naturally at the halfway point between formality and informality, in the intellectual province where all theories and ideas meet, the greatest conflict prevails. This explains the schizophrenic divide in contemporary philosophy. Here too the flaws of modernism and post-modernism are most pronounced. Regarding the former, the failures of systemization and reductionism can be traced to their

attempt to confine phenomena to generic types. Modernism relies on this kind of formalization but it's simply incompatible with the richness of human individuality and the creative forms of expression that ensue from this. Likewise, we find a similar incapacity in post-modernist worldviews to profitably address orderly phenomena and incorporate logical necessities in the systemic ways these require. What we have then are two extremes inadequate for our present circumstances. Post-modernism, as an attempt at jettisoning modernism completely, naturally fails since it can never encompass what modernism successfully encompassed. Modernism in general meanwhile has also become extreme because it has grown increasingly incompatible with our evolved understanding of the world. Consider the world in Newton's time for instance. A mechanistic system of explanation suited it because people perceived the world in a mechanistic way. But as our understanding of the world has grown, it's made the world more organic and spontaneous and, as such, it's increased the gulf between the actual world and the cold mechanistic system outlined in Newtonian dynamics. In this manner we've grown apart from modernism and its principles no longer suit our needs.

Conclusion

If modernism is obsolete though, why should it matter whether it's properly understood or not? And when I say matter here I don't mean matter for other people or matter in any sociological sense. This essay is not about correcting the erroneous use of vocabulary by other people, however incongruous that may sound. Matter in this case means mattering to ourselves; it means mattering in a sense of individual responsibility. In this respect, an understanding of modernism matters because every one of us orients ourselves intellectually in relation to history. Regardless of whether we see history as progressive or haphazard, we still situate ourselves within a local section of it that informs us of how our own ideas came to be held and what we should be aspiring for in the future. Modernism as such is something to progress beyond but this is only possible if we have a genuine idea of what it is we're surpassing.

Even if something becomes obsolete it doesn't mean that it wasn't essential during its own time. Modernism was crucial in the overall progress of humanity since it provided the basis for our initial self-awareness at being capable of cultural advancement. As such modernism is a milestone and a reference point that retains

its relevance in our contemporary circumstances. In fact, unravelling the concept of modernism etymologically we find it derives from the Latin *modo*, meaning “just now” or “at present.” Accordingly, the meaning of modernism in this original context has the same sense as being “contemporary” for us. Its meaning then was acquired through osmosis as no doubt our own era will acquire a unique meaning too. So modernity began from confronting the present without any established values to rely on and now we find ourselves in a similar predicament. Unlike the modernist solution to the past though which involved trying to abandon it, the way forward for us is embracing a kind of simultaneity in all things.

NIETZSCHE
Proto Transhumanist

All great philosophers are misread and the extent to which Nietzsche is misread is enough to prove that he is a very great philosopher indeed. Even among those who proclaim his importance though there seems to be a tendency to corrupt and distort him. Nowhere is the Nietzschean insight that bad friends can be worse afflictions than enemies better proven than within the uneven intellectual quality of the philosopher's many advocates – by idolizing him, and idolizing him with embarrassingly crude idolatry, they've certainly done a terrible disservice to one of history's most formidable iconoclasts. Conscious of this, I want to avoid making the same mistake. However, I think the essence of Nietzsche's work can be presented fairly straightforwardly and, to that end, I offer a synopsis of his main ideas.

What is Nietzsche about? Individuality. He is proclaiming the liberation of the individual through a liberation from ideology. Meaning he is not simply offering up his own ideology to replace others but rather he is condemning the concept of ideology itself. Nietzsche, despite his deep admiration of Spinoza and various Hegelian sympathies, is an anti-systematic philosopher. Quite correctly he perceived that systems are inherently mechanistic and therefore dead. Being dead they are also vehicles for death. For decay. Nietzsche conversely is engaged in an intellectual pursuit of vitality – the kindling of an illuminated mind and spirit through a kind of promethean rebellion against the oppressions of external authorities. How is this achieved? First, through a renunciation of ordinary credence. People are raised believing that certain sources of information are more or less reliable – the government, media, experts, etc. In our own time the trust that the general population has for authority is fatally wounded but even now

various kinds of “facts” are accepted from various kinds of sources without the slightest hint of skepticism. The average person still wants to believe that they’re not being constantly lied to from all directions because the enormity of accepting the alternative means entering a world where all the comforts of innocence are lost; a world that furthermore cannot be escaped from afterwards.

For Nietzsche this attitude is a kind of sickness and debasement of the self. We should accept the world as it truly is and three of Nietzsche’s primary ideas are directly relevant here – the concept of perspectivism, living life grounded in affirmation, and *Amor Fati* (The love of fate) The first of these fundamentally denies authority its traditional basis; that being an inherently elevated or superior perspective. For Nietzsche all viewpoints are equal unless they prove themselves otherwise through outright domination. There is no authority then but what violence makes so – something argued conclusively by Machiavelli centuries earlier (a writer who Nietzsche naturally held a great admiration for) The second of Nietzsche’s concepts at issue, the concept of total affirmation, means not shrinking from even the worst truths. And without the desire for the comforting lies that poison humanity, this means a destruction of the existing power hierarchies. Churches and governments only sustain themselves through falsities so while Nietzsche is not a directly political philosopher, his work is fundamental enough to have serious political repercussions. Lastly there is the love of fate that Nietzsche argued for. How this applies to the liberation of the self from false beliefs may not seem clear initially but it is crucial. Ordinary credence comes from the mundane desires people have – they want the world to be a certain way and so they do everything they can to convince themselves of it. The love of fate then has a primarily epistemological worth – the acceptance of reality frees us from the desire to weave false narratives. It’s a necessary condition of enlightenment.

Again, all these things are the natural outgrowth of the pre-eminence Nietzsche assigns to individuality and in all his ideas one finds the desire for individualization at work. Consider for example his critique of the master-slave relationship. Nietzsche condemns the slave the most but he also condemns the master, and both for the same reason. The slave is contemptible because they have forsaken their individuality – they have allowed themselves to become the mere instrument of another’s will. The master though is only slightly less despicable because their dependence on the slave is itself a negation of true individuality. Like all parasites, the master can only exist by feeding off a host and for Nietzsche the

critical thing is for each of us to pursue the greatest self-sufficiency in all aspects of our lives. All associations should result from acts of choice and not from social dependence. Likewise, his famous proclamation regarding the death of God (preceded by Hegel's own meditations on the same subject) is held to result from an awakening to freedom, to individuality. God can't exist because human beings, even if they lack the knowledge of it, are fundamentally individuals and, as such, independent. Being independent in this ontological sense they cannot be truly connected to a god and so, within their lives no true god can be present. Human life then is only capable of incorporating false gods into its own limitations and the death of God as such is not simply a historical accident but the inevitable result of a higher sense of consciousness coming into being.

Hopefully I've provided a convincing outline of the fact that individuality is the underlying concept driving all of Nietzsche's inquiries, because at this point I would like to move on to two of his least understood ideas before concluding with the still unmentioned thesis contained in this essay's subtitle. What's the ultimate form individualization can take? This is an important question because when we are discussing values in any sense we are discussing teleology. To what end are our actions being directed? To fulfill individuality, to perfect it, involves something like the transvaluation of values. Often this is translated as the re-evaluation of values but that's the result of a general failure of appreciation. Re-evaluating all values is hardly an original idea so why would Nietzsche bother proselytizing it? Effectively it's just standard criticism since people already criticize everything. It doesn't even enlarge the scope of skepticism. If we're going to give Nietzsche any credit we must admit that what he was talking about must be something more fundamental and this gives us the basis for understanding the transvaluation of values in its literal sense. The concept of valuation itself is an effect of our biases. We value some things more than others according to our own predilections and necessities. But liberation is transcendence and, as we liberate ourselves from our own limitations, we'll transcend all the aspects of our own nature in due course. Ultimately this means achieving a spiritual state that's above preferences; a state no longer confined to the relativity of its own finiteness but magnanimously enlarged enough to affirm the whole of the cosmos. Here Nietzsche's love of fate and life of affirmation find their actual fulfillment – a level of being where all values are transvalued, where one's transcendentally omnivorous consciousness can consume the entire substance of the universe without exception. Here we have the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity through an acceptance of the infinite in

totality. The individual who has attained this superlative condition is no longer constrained by anything then. They are truly free.

The transvaluation of values as a means of liberation finds its incarnation in the concept of the *Ubermensch*. Again, translators have done everything in their power to obscure Nietzsche's genius here. The Ubermensch is not a superman. A superman is simply the fulfillment of man's limitations – man reaching his zenith but no farther. The *Ubermensch* rather is an overman, something that truly transcends humanity. Recall that Nietzsche said "*Man is rope tied between beast and overman…*" Humanity then is something to be traversed… if not simply sloughed off and discarded, as the consciousness housed in its body expands. Or, to put it in a more contemporary idiom, humanity is a construct to be disposed of. Clearly this interpretation is more consistent with Nietzsche's general *oeuvre*. Time and time again Nietzsche emphasizes the need to abandon the limitations we impose on ourselves and so the limitation of our sense of ourselves as intrinsically human is simply an extension of that. Rather we are accidentally human and, more deeply, something with aspirations beyond the limitations of human being. What Nietzsche is opposing then is that which is "*all too human*."

Even a mind as prophetic as Nietzsche's though failed to envision the astonishing progress that technology was destined to make – but none of his contemporaries succeeded in this regard either. As such it'd be wrong to call him a transhumanist in the sense the label's acquired yet, in truth, Nietzsche is a more authentic transhumanist than those who simply want to achieve some kind of ascension through cybernetics or biotechnology. If we free ourselves of the inheritance of human physiology only to persist in the limitations of human psychology, we've failed to avail ourselves of our own possibility for greatness. What Nietzsche offers us is therefore something far more immense than any purely physical metamorphosis – it's the outline of a path to a radical new form of consciousness. When the scion of humanity look backwards to pinpoint the place in history where their ancestors took the first step in becoming something more than human, they'll invariably turn to the works of a German philologist; a man whose devotion to the truth led him to gaze directly into the abyss.

PAUL GAUGUIN'S "VISION AFTER THE SERMON"

If we consider the nature of freedom, how freedom can possibly come into existence, it becomes evident that freedom cannot begin in full understanding. We are free precisely where we're able to exercise our own choices and fundamental to this is our ability to mold our own identifies with as little predetermination as possible. That includes our beliefs and states of knowledge. At the same time, the blindness inherent to any degree of ignorance prevents a fully authentic choice from being made so at first it may appear that freedom can't arise at all, given the strict dichotomy in place where neither condition can provide adequate foundations for liberty. The obvious alternative then is to accept that our reality is deterministic and deny the existence of free will. Doing this however clearly couldn't be a matter of choice if the theory being assented to were true so, again, another logical contradiction seems to prevent a satisfactory resolution of the matter. I can be totally certain that anyone capable of reading what I've written here, and contemplating whether reality is wholly deterministic or not, would have to be genuinely conscious in order to have any understanding of the philosophical mystery in question and, as such, they'd also experience the world with the same feeling of possessing choice at every moment in time as I do. Only a truly free being is capable of understanding the mystery of freedom and providing an answer to it. Even if I go so far as to imagine an entirely disembodied consciousness, still I cannot imagine one where the thoughts and focus of the mind aren't at liberty to wander their incoming perceptions. What is purely mechanical is, by definition, devoid of consciousness – it consists in purely external relations which are governed by strict causality and therefore can't encompass the interiority of any conscious form of being. So this settles the matter of whether free will exists but it still doesn't give us a sense of how freedom can emerge from a state of absence. And yet it must.

As we'd naturally expect, the problems of choice figure prominently in mythopoetic narratives. The purpose of a myth after all is to provide the world with meaning and, in order to do this, they have to provide some degree of resolution to the conflicting desires human beings feel in relation to their world. Specifically, they have to give us insights about how to live. In the modern era this function is more and more being taken over by fiction but the same principle applies – through the struggle of a protagonist against opposing forces, the audience is provided with a means to cope with their own personal adversities. Paintings aren't excluded from contributing here either. Despite their static limitations in comparison with film, music, and literature, the visual arts in their earliest twin forms of painting and sculpture made their own unique contributions to addressing the human predicament via iconography. The iconic image clearly has power. Its singularity of form means that whatever it expresses will have all of its impact concentrated to the highest degree – like a hurled spear, the whole weight and force behind it will be entirely focused into a unifying point and this will bestow it with a means of maximum penetration. From this we are easily able to understand why the practice of meditating on icons has proven itself capable of doing so much in terms of facilitating revelations. In two ways then, Paul Gauguin's painting "Vision After the Sermon" is relevant – besides that it is itself an iconic painting it also depicts the purpose of an icon, revelation, as its subject matter.

Unlike most of other leading contemporaries of his time, artists he was well acquainted with, Gauguin often preferred to paint from imagination. Not only was it the era of impressionism where painters were focusing on the role of perception in interpreting the world but even a friend and visionary like Vincent van Gogh preferred to overlay an actual observation of things with his expressionistic powers rather than conjure visions from pure invention. Because of the greater freedom this afforded Gauguin though, he was able to create innovative masterpieces without the inevitable constraints a reliance on external sources entails. "Vision After the Sermon" is a notable example of this. The vivid red of the area depicted not only accentuates the wrestling figures in the scene but it also reinforces the supernatural context where a group of women are bearing witness to a miraculous vision of the patriarch Jacob wrestling an angel. Furthermore we find in the painting a synthesis of many techniques – the discriminating arrangement of the figures in the scene to imbue it with emotional tension following in the neoclassical style of someone like Ingres, the use of large areas of single contrasting colors conforming to the manner of traditional Japanese painters, the purely suggestive depiction of

the three faces along the middle of the far right as one would find in the work of an impressionist; all these confirm Gauguin's willingness to employ the many resources at his disposal without any deference to the biases of those who created them. Gauguin, despite his many flaws as a human being, affords us an example of an artist brave enough to follow completely his own instincts.

The story of Jacob wrestling an angel happens to encompass the same spirit of human independence. To summarize the most relevant details, Jacob is returning to the land of his father after many years away when he receives word that his older brother Esau is coming to greet him with four hundred men. This frightens Jacob because, before he left, he'd tricked Esau into pledging away his birthright and then also stole a blessing from their father Isaac meant for his brother by pretending to be him. As such he has no idea whether his brother is still intent on revenging himself and, as Jacob sends his flocks, servants, children, and wives ahead to cross the river Jabbok at night, he is left alone on the other side. There someone who at first appears to be a man wrestles him until daybreak. With Jacob refusing to relent, the disguised angel touches the socket of Jacob's thigh and dislocates his leg. Still Jacob won't quit. He only agrees to do so if his opponent will bless him and by this he extracts from the angel the following: "*You're name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.*" (Genesis 32: 28) Hence the origin of the name for the modern nation of Israel and the historical identification of the Jewish people as the Israelites. More significantly, the biblical etymology for the name Israel itself translates to "He who strives with God." Now, one of the founding tenets of traditional Judaism is that the Israelites are the chosen people of God and, setting aside the veracity of this for the moment, we can ask the broader question of what would make any people the chosen people of God. Understanding the relationship to God in a more general way as a relationship with the infinite and with the creative source of all things, since that's precisely what God personifies, we can infer that the chosen people, the elect, or however we want to refer to them, will be such as a result of their spiritual condition. The special relationship then is grounded in an affinity among certain human beings for the divine.

In this way we can interpret the symbolic meaning of Jacob wrestling with the angel as something that exemplifies the nature of a truly spiritual people. To be spiritual is to wrestle with spiritual concerns and to engage in an earnest striving for spiritual knowledge. In fact this is true of any kind of dedication – the moral

individual is the person who struggles with morality and the individual devoted to science is the person who struggles with scientific understanding. Because that's the only way that we can be truly engaged in something. This then explains why the angel, standing in as a representation of God, would bless Jacob for defying the angel's appeals to be released. What Jacob was wrestling with ultimately was the mystery, the mystery of the universe and human purpose and the mystery of the finite and mortal in relationship to the infinite and immortal. But then the mystery of purpose is given in that very act – the meaning of life is to understand the world and invest oneself in it as profoundly as possible. It's to take hold of God and not let go until the divine gives up its reward.

Another one of Gauguin's famous works is titled "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?" The search for meaning is pretty much encompassed in these three questions – here we have the past, our context, the present, our circumstance, and the future, our destiny, all offered to us in the form of mysteries. To be revealed to us however they must be revealed in time since revelation is necessarily a process and the way this process is realized is through the individual striving in accordance with their own deepest desires. Since any kind of desire can only be fulfilled in a manner consistent with the basic nature of desire, the realization all desires end in is the realization of liberation. Desire is satisfied by overcoming the obstruction of its fulfillment and the overcoming of all our obstructions is a perfectly achieved freedom. As spiritual individuals struggle with God then they are struggling with their own mortality, their own limitations, and the final blessing of God they obtain is the transcendence of this through acquired wisdom. All that the angel did was rename Jacob. What Jacob received then was not a transfer of power from an external source but a truer understanding of who he really was – he was blessed by a deeper realization of his own nature. Similarly with Gauguin's depiction, the worth of the miracle the women are witnessing lies not in a physical transformation they themselves are partaking in, no purely physical transformation can have spiritual value, but rather the gift of a divine insight which they themselves will appreciate according to their own spiritual earnestness. What will distinguish the authentic spiritual person from those who aren't? The authentic person will never cease striving. They'll endure until the divine surrenders its gifts to them.

POETRY IS FUNDAMENTAL

Life is full of small things that go unnoticed. Many poems are likewise small and similarly easy to dismiss. Epic poetry is the exception rather than the rule and, even then, it still can't have the same kind of impact it once did. There was a time when poetry was central to the cultures of various civilizations. The Aeneid for example gave the Ancient Romans a means to define themselves in glorious terms. But nowadays, with the hegemony of a pervasive commercial media, modern technology, and a science grounded cosmological framework unable to support any kind of grand mythology, it would seem that poetry has reached its most humble state. Poetry, like the grass we walk on, barely attracts public notice. I'd say that this is an actually a good thing though.

The less a thing or practice is grounded in the power relationships that affect society, the freer it is to devote itself to truth. It's not a coincidence that great art and great epiphanies tends to have their source in outsiders, in individuals touched by solitude and so able to conceive things that are wholly new. And, while many great artists and thinkers are able to preserve their creative abilities even when they achieve later success, just as often the luxuries and decadence of success can drown out the original creative music that nourished their souls. Such people then lose their connection to the source and squander their ability to refresh their own minds and passions. So how can we resist this pitfall?

Poetry is a solution here. Real poetry, when it's honest and skillful, has an incredible and unique transformative power that cam rejuvenate our sense of ourselves and the world. Poetry is the liberation of language; it is language set on fire and thrust into the dry and rotting undergrowth of society. Poetry can kindle in

us a fresh passion where once there was only dull regret and faint nostalgia. Poetry enlivens the whole person and as such it enlivens everything they do. This could be something as technical as mathematics because, even though the poetry a person is reading may have nothing to do with that, the zeal for life will permeate even these kinds of formal activities. Poetry aims directly for the quality in life and clears everything else away. Good poetry mind you.

Of course there's a lot of bad poetry but all bad poetry is done in treachery to the true spirit of poetry. When poetry isn't striving to reach something genuine and meaningful, when it's not done with a conscious appreciation for the skill required to fulfill its particular poetic form, then it'll inevitably result in mere stillbirths. Conversely, when poetry is sincere it will burst with liveliness even in its most meager forms. Allow me to furnish two examples here:

In all my prayers to Buddha
I keep on killing
Mosquitos

- Issa

Candy
is dandy
But liquor
is quicker

- Ogden Nash

The above should make clear that even with poetry constrained by the strictest simplicity, not only in length but in style as well, still it retains a marvelous capacity to capture extraordinary meaning. With the first of these poems we have a beautiful haiku expressing the poet's casual recognition of his own hypocrisy and the fundamental difficulty of trying to live strictly by a moral criterion (since any such criterion with any depth will inevitably involve us in some fundamental moral difficulty at some point) This kind of thinking then goes right to the heart of who

we really are. And in what other format is this possible? With this level of concision and beauty? Moving on to the next poem we find something equally interesting being conveyed. On the surface it's just a little limerick confessing a sort of blunt and impolite fact about a kind of human relationship prevalent in society. The pragmatic seduction divorced of any romanticism. Even here though the words shimmer with greater meaning. Why is one bribe better than the other? Because one has more power. And power isn't the nice little confection, it's the judgement stripping libation that renders a person senseless.

Poetry as an attitude is investment in the meaning that the world has to offer. It's all our senses charged with the greatest zeal, hungry to find the mystery and beauty in things. It's a remarkable thing then and only made more precious by its delicacy and sensitivity. The world needs more poetry. And poetry speaks to the heart of people. That poetry has been allowed to acquire the reputation of being an uneconomical pastime is strange and grotesque. We're living in an age where people are well acclimatized to micro-media and the one kind of literature that best fits this format has somehow been dismissed as irrelevant. No. Poetry now is of the utmost relevance. Poetry will flourish in our own lifetime. Because, no matter how much concrete we cover our earth with, the primordial green force will always rise up and splinter through. Watch. Poetry is awakening.

THE INADEQUACY OF PERFECTION
On Henry James and Washington Square

I've heard it claimed that authors of fiction can no longer write with the same confidence they had during the nineteenth century. If true, this must stem from an increasing prevalence of self-doubt in society and the assertion itself then is almost evidence for its own conclusion – after all, what nineteenth century critic would've disparaged their contemporaries with a similar accusation? This furthermore fits with a wider consensus about our times. Since the advent of modernism, uncertainty has permeated further and further into the mortar of civilization. Picasso's fracturing of the female face for example was a concrete and symbolic expression of the fracturing of beauty as an aesthetic ideal, the emergence of concepts like relativity and indeterminacy in physics were likewise the result of the rapidly eroding delusion of a mechanistic universe, and perhaps what was most central to the onset of doubt in our age was our confronting the psychological reality of the unconscious which, in one stroke, opened up an abyss underneath our collective sense of identity. With people unsure even about the nature of their own motives, it's not surprising that art would suffer a corresponding decrease in its own assuredness.

Yet confidence is crucial. It's the basis for all successful enterprise – you can't accomplish anything without feeling that you can do so first. At the same time, confidence can only be solidly grounded in truth so there's no way to simply imbue our culture with it by trying to stifle the spirit of skepticism. What we need then is a way forward that somehow synthesizes the dynamic quintessence of the nineteenth century with the greater depths of realization since then. But doing so requires understanding how the transition happened to begin with and for that we

have to reconsider the state of culture immediately prior to modernism; especially in the incarnations of its greatest triumphs. Only by a thorough appreciation of what was missing in society before the modernist revolution took over can we hope to illuminate the process unfolding here. To that end we can turn to any number of specific examples but in this essay I intend to focus on a single one that happens to contain a remarkable degree of metaphorical parallelism with respect to the present inquiry – Henry James' 1880 novel "Washington Square."

I won't claim that Washington Square is totally unsurpassed in its narrative confidence but, even just a few pages in, readers of contemporary fiction will be struck by the authority of its tone. James describes his characters bluntly and boldly, leaving no hint of anything eluding the omniscience of the author. True, the characters are only gradually revealed for who they really are but at no time does the narration resort to equivocation to accomplish this – rather new situations are introduced with such consummate artistry that the syllogistic manner in which the story's revelations are made seems utterly natural despite that. Contributing to this overall effect are two other aspects of James' writing – the first being his keenness of psychological insight. The way he describes his characters moral and mental states has none of the contrivance of invention – rather he succeeds in giving the impression that he's making observations about fully real human beings. Second, the style of prose he uses in Washington Square is so immaculate, so finely wrought in its rhythms and shifts in mood and perspective, that the reader is never given reason to question the opinions of the narrator. This is important; just as someone speaking in public with a stammer tends to raise suspicions that they're groping for thoughts they do not possess, so too flaws in an author's prose immediately bring all the assertive elements, explicit or implicit, of their story into distrust. No doubt many of James' weaker contemporaries tried to write with the same authoritative tone as him and only ended up accentuating their own defects by doing so. The failures of minor writers though are less edifying – what we're striving to find here are signs of the pre-modernist order undergoing a break down. Washington Square provides this. Because, while on the surface it's an impeccably rational work – a story moving as precisely as a clockwork masterpiece, with every element in its narrative turning with an expertly refined smoothness – the actual theme of the story is one of a radical, albeit domestic, breakdown in social order. The people James' portrays with such precision are profoundly dysfunctional. They're like us.

It has to be admitted that this isn't unique to Henry James or nineteenth century literary fiction. We find it in ancient Greek tragedies, we find it in Shakespeare – but that's obviously one of the reasons why those works continue to retain their contemporary significance. In so far as humanism and humanity exist in fiction, they exist entirely in the relatable imperfections of characters that provide us with insights about our own condition and the extended social world. And this is precisely what a thoroughly rational work of art is unable to provide. Just as the descriptive powers of geometry can only describe the world in hollow forms, so too a rationalistic literature can only give us a picture of things mutilated to fit into finite categories and orderly processions. In Washington Square moreover we have this tension at the very crest of the wave before it crashed into the various modernist experiments that followed. We have genius, so to speak, trapped in amber at the moment of its transformation.

In one sense, Washington Square can be described as a work without defect. It's perfectly crafted. However, the world it portrays is limited in the extreme. Aside from the confined scope of the novel to a handful of characters and a few bare environments (a year across Europe is reduced to a single desolate valley in the Alps) it's more importantly limited in the sense that the narrative develops without the slightest influence from the chaos of life. The real world is a haphazard place where random events are constantly intruding and making demands on our attentions. In Washington Square though, the only forces driving the story are the desires of the characters themselves – they're the only dynamic aspect in their fictional universe after the initial chance deaths that outline the context for the rest of the narrative. To introduce a brief tangent of sorts into my essay now, it's interesting that the setting of Washington Square likewise conforms to this observation. I wrote earlier of metaphorical parallelism and it's certainly evident in the relation of the rationalistic sensibility predominant on the eve of modernism and the world of the upper class New Yorkers inhabiting Washington Square – their lives, in reality and even more so in their depiction by James, are remarkably untouched by external forces. They're the sole movers in their environment and they prosper or perish according to a strict personal causality. If they're ingenious and exert themselves, they succeed – if not they suffer the purgatory of stagnate fortunes. How unlike the actual world of the majority this is. Those of us who haven't been kept naïve by inherited wealth or uninterrupted luck know that perfect conduct can still lead us along the path to ruin. I should clarify that I'm not putting forward these thoughts as a criticism of James' outlook on the world, I'm

sure he understood perfectly well the vicissitudes of chaos, only that art in the era prior to modernism was so thoroughly in the grips of a romantic and imaginary sense of realism that even a novel as penetrating in its indictment of human pathologies as Washington Square still betrays a bald obliviousness to the artificiality that permeates its narrative. Whether James came to an appreciation of this in his later years I can't say but it's interesting to note that he excluded Washington Square from the "New York Edition" of his collected works.

Again, I feel the need to clarify myself and emphasize that I'm not criticizing Washington Square for the narrowness of its scope. If it were written today it would still be a masterpiece. What I am saying is that its limitations represent the prevailing limitations of its era – while no work of art can be everything it is still something significant when the totality of society's artistic endeavors are constricted in a specific way and that constriction is contained in the limitations of a single concrete example. There's a difference then in choosing a narrow scope for a particular project and the narrowness one is working under being something outside one's perceptions. Accordingly I do not believe Henry James was making this choice – I think he was still writing under the dominion of a rationalistic conception of the world and, like the graceful movements of a wild animal in a moment of full power, his writing was, however perfect, equally circumscribed by an unconsciousness of perfection.

Maybe the greatest liability that knowledge carries is that it tends to increase our doubts. New insights raise new questions and the deeper we investigate the world around us the more empty space we find ourselves surrounded by that we can fill with fears and problems. This is also indicative of what occurred in the transition to modernism – culture itself finally became problematized, it became something one had to consciously re-evaluate without the crutch of any unquestionable orthodoxies, and as such all areas of art simultaneously underwent a tumultuous period of self-assessment. Traditional poetic meters gave way to experimental verse, painting splintered into various inventive and abstract forms, and fiction outgrew its established themes, narrative structures, and morally imposed strictures, to embrace a fuller comprehension of life as it really was. As dramatic as this transition happened to be, aided by the horrific trauma of the first world war, it was clearly the result of a gestation over an extended length of time as is evident in the critical self-consciousness emerging from impressionist painting and the admission of squalor and even banality into the content of popular fiction.

As more or less already stated, with Washington Square the earlier rationalistic conception reaches its zenith, but this also amounts to being pregnant, so to speak, with the negation of its own era. On the threshold of modernism, James wrote a rationalistically stylized novel addressing central modernist themes – alienation, the question of authenticity, and the void left by the absence of a protagonist which one can either admire, experience the work vicariously through, or otherwise invest with the whole of one's sympathies. Despite James' rationalistic refinement as represented by his prose, this is only an exterior perfection covering a more profound interior imperfection. So there's an incongruity between form and substance. Rationality progresses by absorbing the world into its rationally constructed categories but it's only able to continue doing so until it encounters something more ineffable than the fineness that its mesh can snare and, at this point, the entire net of rationalism has to be remade in its entirety. Modernism then is simply the next stage in the relentless cycles of reformation manifest throughout human history.

Returning to Washington Square, the narrator has an antithetical presence with respect to the characters in the story and he analyzes them demiurgically, exceeding even the ruthless objectivity of the character of Dr. Sloper. Despite the familiarity with which the narrator speaks to the reader, alluding to private sentiments here and there, they're the polite sentiments of a polished urbanity conversing with a new acquaintance at a staid social gathering – there's little to suggest any real emotional investment in the outcome of the story. Is this then the attitude that a person should cultivate with respect to modernism itself? Detachment? Aloofness? It certainly seems to be the prevailing attitude but I'd argue no and offer the example of Dr. Sloper once again as the basis for a counterargument. The difficulties of irrationality aren't best addressed by contriving an ironic or disinterested attitude to things – the obvious metaphorical parallel here being Dr. Sloper estranging his only daughter from him through these exact forms of relationship. Symbolically then we can identify the failure here with the failure, evident in all postmodernist approaches, to provide adequate compensation for the loss of our rationalistic illusions. Indifference, the soul of every species of irony and detachment, responds to frustrated passions (in the broadest sense, our pre-modernist hope for an ordering of the world) with the starvation of passion itself through a kind of condescending renunciation. In doing

so however it only succeeds at cementing its own failure and succumbing to a delusion of victory.

Reconciling rationality and irrationality must of course arise out of some kind of resolute determination but, instead of doing so through apathetic acceptance, it demands a reaffirmation of passion in some form. Rationality after all was created to give order to life, not extinguish life under the suffocations of a more highly valued order. Rationality then is a means not an end. The true end is life itself and, in so far as irrationality is intrinsic to life, it's not something to shrink from. Passion in and of itself is like fire, neither good nor bad, but depending above all on how it's employed. The uncertainty that modernism carries with it must be recognized as an inevitable consequence of the greater freedom it bestows on us and to react to this with the kind of intellectual cowardice personified in postmodernism, where glib and obscurantic relativisms take the place of serious inquiry, is to fundamentally sabotage our own culture. The way forward from modernism is not postmodernist or pre-modernist – rather it lies in the recognition that the irrational and chaotic in life have their own intrinsic worth and meaning.

This is where perfection does us no good. In perfection everything is complete, perfection is supremely rational, and as such perfection leaves no room for progress. But if progress isn't the movement towards perfection, what is it? Rather progress is the movement towards greater incompletion – the endless improvement of one's capacity to improve, which freshly illuminates the supposed crisis of modernity not as something to be overcome through any rationalistic triumph, but instead, as something to be channeled and magnified through a reaffirming passion. Perfection will always prove to be inadequate in the end because it eliminates the potential for radically new dynamics and the stimulation this provides is precisely what gives continual meaning to life. The fact that all four of the major characters in Washington Square fail to embody this principle serves to illustrate my point – each seeks their satisfaction in some vision of perfection and, when they are frustrated in this, they resign themselves to nothingness. Dr. Sloper does more than just alienate his daughter from him by the callous way he contrives to ensure she doesn't marry a mercenary charlatan, he guarantees this estrangement from the onset in his entire attitude to her and in his approach to Catherine's upbringing. Aunt Penniman similarly squanders her life in romantic fantasies and in an increasingly contemptible meddling in her niece's engagement. She lives vicariously because, again, the shallow perfection of her ideals excludes a

real attempt to seek fulfillment in her own life. Morris Townsend, the charlatan who even Dr. Sloper admits is a man of great promise, never fulfills this because instead of exerting himself in utilizing his talents he tries to cash in on those talents in the most superficial way possible – by marrying rich. He too then wastes himself on a fixation with his own perfect ideal. And finally there's Catherine, the most sympathetic of the four, but she's also a failure. While she does ostensibly overcome a pathological deference to her father, she allows her disappointment in him to rule her life ever after and resigns herself to a loveless existence. The dignity she displays in the end by rejecting Townsend years after he abandoned her is poor compensation for not actually moving on with her life. That's the essential danger of perfection – its power to arrest us. If the perfectionist can't fulfill their ideal, they succumb to paralysis.

I spoke initially of confidence and it's with the intent of obtaining a basis for a broad cultural restoration of this that I turn my remarks now. What drained our culture of its confidence was the recognition of an underlying chaos in the world. This raised the specter of arbitrary fate. If things are really so haphazard and elusive, confidence seems difficult to justify. Where visions of the ultimate used to console us, now we find ourselves apparently alone before an unending and indifferent eternity. We should recognize the fact that we can make our situation out to be as dire as we want though only because we've acquired a limitless freedom. How constrained we were by our preoccupation with perfection! In its place, inexhaustible avenues of liberation have arisen. Isn't this to our advantage? I suppose everyone has to answer that for themselves but certainly it offers a great deal to inspire confidence. Our confidence as such can draw its strength from a wealth of possibilities rather than a solitary inhuman necessity. With modernism we've come into our true inheritance – forever, as it were.

THE KEY TO THE WASTE LAND

Introduction

Among the rarest literary works are those having an originality and power establishing them as the defining achievement in their era. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is certainly such a text but beyond this there's little critical consensus. The poem is notorious for its supposed obscurity. Nevertheless, I'll proceed to offer a full analysis of it with the accompanying claim that this will illuminate the true meaning of the work. Said meaning will consist primarily in what can be objectively derived from a close reading of the poem itself without relying on other sources but, after doing so, I'll endeavor to show how this is consistent with the explanatory notes Eliot subsequently attached to it, as well as his use of symbolism in other works and some of the notable comments he made regarding the poem. Despite the fact that there's a large body of literature that addresses The Waste Land, including both tremendously insightful observations and almost unimaginably absurd distortions, I'll refrain from quoting any of these for a number of reasons. First, because the real meaning of any text must be contained within the actual text itself – whatever anyone else might have said about a work, this can only be accurate if their judgements are necessitated by the content of the work in question. Second, because the goal of this essay is to be able to explain the meaning of The Waste Land to any generally interested reader and a survey of the prevailing opinions regarding the poem are not relevant to that. Third, and finally, because even though the work is suffused with quotations and literary allusions, the significance of these is contingent on how they're employed in their own particular way – again, something that can only be determined by a direct analysis of the words said text contains. The ultimately informal nature of poetry of course makes

it impossible to eliminate all ambiguity here but, like with the gradual deciphering of an unknown language, clarity unfolds as the translation of individual elements accumulates; the sum of these acting collectively to unlock more and more of the mystery as they support each other in assisting understanding.

Analysis

I believe the best way to explain the poem is to begin by taking the reader through it sequentially and, in doing that, the first obstacle that's encountered is an epigraph to the poem written in Latin and Greek. Many commentators seem perfectly content to ignore it but, for me, recognizing its central importance to The Waste Land was what began my own process of really understanding the poem. It's the key the title of this essay refers to – like a physical key which opens a lock or, a better analogy maybe, like a cipher key which makes an encryption translatable. Appreciating the epigraph in this case gives us the fundamental challenge being grappled with throughout and I'll quote Eliot's own translation of it now:

I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: "Sibyl, what do you want?" she answered: "I want to die."

I will return to the significance of the Sibyl at the conclusion of my analysis but, for now, the crucial thing to note is that the misery of the Sibyl is the result of her inability to die. A prophetess of Apollo, she was offered anything she desired by the god in return for becoming his lover and for this she demanded to live for as many years as there were grains of sand in a handful of dust. She was granted her wish but persisted in refusing Apollo and suffered the consequences. The Sibyl hadn't specified that she enjoy her long life in youth and so Apollo was not bound by oath to protect her from growing increasingly old and shrivelled. The quote itself is taken from Petronius who, in his Satyricon, has one of his characters recount the time he saw her at Apollo's temple. The horror represented by the Waste Land then is not death and destruction but rather lingering stagnation and unending decay. Of course, the epigraph by itself isn't enough to establish this interpretation conclusively but the correctness of this reading will be supported by other aspects of the poem as the analysis proceeds.

I. The Burial of the Dead

The phrase “April is the cruellest month” is famous enough on its own to be recognized by many literate people without any particular interest in poetry, but this hasn’t done much to add to its genuine appreciation. Why is April the cruellest month? Consider the line in the context of the first part of its accompanying stanza:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

April is here synonymous with spring and the reawakening of the winter landscape – an unusual choice of imagery for a poem titled The Waste Land. Within the lyricism and superficially vigorous depiction of nature though a weariness is evident. Spring, and by extension life in general, has become a kind of harassment, a disturbing of what would otherwise rest. And rest eternally. Already then the interpretation that was obtained from the epigraph is proving itself accurate – the substance of The Waste Land is the conflict between the burdening and compulsory character of life and the longing for death this inspires. “Winter kept us warm” likewise parallels the peace of oblivion that death should provide. Of course, the seasons are cyclical and each winter gives way to an ensuing spring – so we have cause now to keep an eye out for references to a similar fate afflicting humanity.

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deuscht.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

The preceding selection demonstrates a dramatic shift in tone and voice with respect to the previous one. The first was regular, rhythmic, and abstract – this is halting and conversational. It strongly suggests a different speaker since the Marie who's obviously reminiscing in the above selection hardly seems capable of the previous profundity and apocalyptic seriousness. The contrast here in fact seems to be the point and this cavalcading of voices will be a recurring motif throughout. Two additional things are also worth noting. The fact that the rumination on spring by the first unidentified speaker transitions into Marie's anecdote about summer indicates that these voices are not haphazardly thrown together but integrated around some fundamental purpose. Then, the phrase in German, which translates as "I am not Russian, I come from Lithuania, I am really German," gives us the first piece of evidence of a subsidiary theme which will persist from here on out – that being the problem of identity. Already the reader should be able to infer that this has some intrinsic relationship to the use of multiple voices.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is a shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Another shift in the individual speaking immediately raises the question as to whether this is a third person now or a return to the first. It's hard to tell. Given the insufficiency of textual cues it's best to set aside the issue for the moment. What can be ascertained though is the character of the speaker. The use of the phrase "son of man" here is telling – it implies a speaker representing something superior to humanity. When referring to another, it's a term primarily used by God in The Bible while addressing men. Although Jesus used the phrase as well, the point is the same – this is a voice possessing divine authority. The selection from the poem above proceeds to describe the spiritual predicament of humankind through allegory, the merciless desert being portrayed here obviously standing in

for something universal. The last line furthermore demands special mention because of its direct connection to the epigraph at the beginning of the poem. The handful of dust mentioned here is symbolic of the one the Sibyl made her wish with, but the fear it conjures isn't simply the shadow of her error, it's the more general dread of the power of the divine to fulfill our wishes and desires while simultaneously transforming the fulfillment of these into catastrophe. How can we trust ourselves after all if our own efforts can be turned against us by a transcendental power? Accepting the ultimate futility of human agency, combined with the struggle inherent to all life, we would find the world around us converted into a soulless waste land of meaningless strife. We are no longer bound then simply by the fatal points of birth and death, rather our whole existence is permeated with an eternal metaphysical gulf separating our intentions and our ability to realize them.

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind
Wo weilest du?

Punctuating the despair now is a quote from Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde' which translates as "Fresh blows the wind / To the Homeland / My Irish darling / Where do you linger?" While on the surface this seems to have no obvious affinity to the main theme of the poem, in fact it strongly reinforces it. Context here is essential. The above is uttered by a sailor overhead by Isolde as she is making a journey by sea to meet her appointed husband, the King of Cornwall, as a result of a loveless arranged marriage. Isolde tries to commit suicide by poison before that but the intervention of her maid results in her drinking a love potion instead and falling for Tristan – the quote then emphasizes again the power of fate to reduce our most earnest actions into their exactly opposite results.

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl.'
– Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking out into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.

The next speaker gives us an autobiographical anecdote within which the main theme of the poem is again repeated. Being utterly subordinate to the powers of fate, life loses its vitality and the distinction between life and death becomes existentially meaningless – the mere capacity for movement, animation, change, etc is not enough to satisfy the requirements of life since these are common to decay also. Life rather requires purpose and self-determination, otherwise there's no possibility for growth. Only a cosmic violence would remain. The reference to hyacinths likewise functions on a symbolic level – first of all because the hyacinth is associated with spring. More tellingly though, Hyacinthus was a young prince loved by Apollo (again Apollo) who was either accidentally killed by the god while trying to retrieve Apollo's discus, or murdered out of jealousy by the west wind Zephyr, and then commemorated by Apollo with a flower conjured from his pooling blood – the hyacinth. So both resistance to the divine and submission to it produce the same conclusion, meaning that individual freedom is an illusion. The concluding line is another quote from Tristan und Isolde, which translates as "Desolate and empty the sea." The sea as such illustrates our spiritual condition, where we are looking for something along the horizon that never comes. Here a wounded Tristan is waiting for Isolde but his lookout reports no ships in view.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known as the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are the pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three-staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and his card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

The Madame Sosostris episode is a crucial one for the reader to understand in the development of the poem since the tarot reading she gives corresponds to the structure and meaning of the overall poem itself. Her name seems to be chosen by Eliot ironically since Sosostris was a pharaoh who ancient Egyptian priests claimed had invaded and conquered parts of Europe, as relayed by a skeptical Herodotus, although this legend was considered patently false by Eliot's time. As such, the implication is that she's a fraud. And yet her predictions are insightful, which seems to indicate that the tarot itself is a genuine means of deriving fortunes in the context of the poem but that she herself doesn't truly understand it and can only inadvertently predict things. As for the specifics of her reading, I'll refer back to them later as they manifest themselves throughout the poem. One other thing worth noting though is her vision of crowds walking around in a ring – an additional hint that the waste land is predicated on a cosmological repetition.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him crying: 'Stetson!
'You were with me in the ships at Mylae!
'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

Arriving at the end of the first division of the poem, the burial of the dead culminates with a depiction of a purgatorial afterlife. The London invoked here is a dream city populated by haunted phantoms, and an allusion to Dante's description in his Inferno of souls in limbo. The fact that this is a place outside of normal time, a place on the threshold of eternity, is indicated by the juxtaposition of historically separated elements. The street references are contemporary to Eliot's own age and the man being stopped has a similarly contemporary name, but "Stetson" was

apparently with the speaker of this part at the battle of Mylae during the first Punic War between Rome and Carthage. This is likely a deliberate attempt to connect the absurdity and pointlessness of that war with the first world war that had just been fought a few years prior to the publication of The Waste Land but, more profoundly, it's also indicative of a cyclical conception of fate – that the same war is really being fought in different guises and always without any ultimate purpose. Interestingly, the speakers' mind seems to degenerate as he questions Stetson in a way congruent with how dreams dissolve; the failure of Stetson's corpse to bloom (a reference to the impossibility of growth) apparently triggering a collapse in coherent thought processes. Yet there is still some logic within the churning mental turmoil. The line about the dog who's a friend to men is an inversion of something said during a dirge in Webster's "White Devil" where a warning is given to keep wolves, a natural foe, away from the buried dead lest they be dug up again. The cynicism of Eliot's reference here is clear – that even friends (the dog, the most loyal of all animals) can do the same evil as our enemies despite their affectionate intentions. Once more, the futility of purposeful action is highlighted.

'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!'

The above concluding line is taken from Baudelaire and its significance here is essentially the same as when Baudelaire used it. "You! hypocrite reader! – my likeness – my brother!" Baudelaire listed a litany of evils in the world and named the reader (and himself) as supreme among them. So too, Eliot has his speaker condemn Stetson as a moral failure (all immorality being some form of hypocrisy) and by extension the readers of The Waste Land too – the delusion of morality being something incompatible with the fatalist predicament we share. Morality as such can amount to nothing more than a self-serving lie.

II. A Game of Chess

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up the standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of the seven branched candelabra
Reflecting the light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,

From satin cases poured in rich profusion.
In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
That freshened from the window, these ascended
In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.
Huge sea-wood fed with copper
Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,
In which sad light a carvèd dolphin swam.
Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
Footsteps shuffled on the stair.
Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

Beginning the second section of the poem Eliot starts with an extended description of a chair and a room involving very detailed imagery. Interestingly, the woman initially alluded to here is only indirectly addressed during the lines that follow until finally her hair is mentioned but, a clear equation is still made between her situation and the tragedy of Philomela – she too is a woman of privilege who is ensnared but, unlike her counterpart, it is not an individual man who holds her in bondage. The world in pursuit here is the world as an omnipresent oppressive force for which there is no possibility of escape. Naturally, seeing the world in this way will incline someone to despair and evidence of this being the case for the woman in question is given in the fragments of conversation that follow.

'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking? Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?'
The wind under the door.
'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
Nothing again nothing.
'Do
You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
Nothing?'

I remember
Those are the pearls that were his eyes.
'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?'
But

Regardless of whether they are meant to be the same speaker, clearly the woman here is strongly reminiscent of Marie from earlier. Both seem to share a kind of frivolous character and shallowness of thought. When the other person in this dialogue responds to her inane questions with blunt morbidity, she quickly tries to change the subject by asking about a perceived noise. A common trait, among the sort of well-to-do people Eliot no doubt often found himself reluctantly socializing with, is the tendency to simply ignore anything that might jeopardize their state of superficial happiness no matter how glaring. Also, since this woman is associated with the beautiful Philomela, we can identify her as the Belladonna mentioned in Madame Sosostris' tarot reading. As the lady of situations she must confront the problem of choice, as we see in the present dialogue.

O O O O that Shakespearian Rag –
It's so elegant
So intelligent
'What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?

What shall we ever do?'

Here there is a brief interruption from a popular song of the times, significant because of its reference to Shakespeare but also apparently indicative of the fact that the woman speaking is fiddling with a radio as she tries to distract herself from the conversation she's stumbled into. More than anything she wants to forget about the existential uncertainties she's inadvertently raised for herself.

The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the
door.

Despite the second section being titled "A Game of Chess" the two lines included above provide the only actual reference to chess and as such we should interpret the game in this context metaphorically. What chess symbolizes is a kind of zero sum situation where every personal advantage can only be obtained at another person's disadvantage and where success for oneself means failure for someone else, or vice versa. The rape of Philomela is representative of this kind of conflict but we also find it presented more subtly and elaborately in the shape of the conversation that was just provided. The two speakers in this part are speaking in opposition to one another, one to persist in delusion and the other to wallow in melancholy. What Eliot is demonstrating here then is the continuity between the strife in nature and our ostensibly separate and elevated social condition, because of which the same cyclical futility which holds sway over the former must inevitably also dominate the latter. The essence of the waste land, its emptiness and desolation, simply manifests itself in different forms regardless of whatever level of existence we are considering.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said –
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he
gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it to him, there's others will, I said.
Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and she gave me a straight look.
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.
Others can pick and choose if you can't.
But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
(And her only thirty-one.)
I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
You *are* a proper fool, I said.
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
What you get married for if you don't want children?
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.
Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

The next shift in narrative which defines the preceding selection transports us into the midst of a social meetup of some kind in the recent aftermath of the first world war. A woman named Lil is having marital problems with her now demobilized husband and her friend is gossiping about a talk they had in regards to this. The conversation going on is apparently taking place in an English pub since the standard call at closing time is used here (Hurry up please it's time) but this should also be appreciated as a general parallelism of the insistence external forces exert over everyday life. The gossiping woman here is clearly trying to ignore the imperative to leave but in the end she is forced to confront the reality of departure. There is a correlation then between the ordinary parting of social situations and the terminus of concluded mortality. That this is symbolic of death is further

reinforced by the use of a quotation from Hamlet – the final line is uttered by Ophelia in the midst of her madness and despair as she says farewell to the king and queen, just prior to her committing suicide.

III. The Fire Sermon

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are
departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are
departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept…
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

The title of the third section is taken from the famous sermon by the Buddha and this now affirms the cyclical nature of the human predicament that Eliot's wrestling with. In the fire sermon the Buddha lays out how the individual can achieve liberation from reincarnation through overcoming karma and entrapment by the material world – essentially the same kind of suffering the poem has been depicting in various forms; the desperation for release. So far however, Eliot has not presented us with a positive alternative and here too he is still illustrating the condition of the waste land through symbolic imagery.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground

And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.
But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

The person fishing in this section is the man with three staves. Although Eliot explicitly acknowledges this in his notes on the poem, we can make this inference on our own by identifying the stave with the fishing pole and the use of staves to lean on by those suffering infirmity. This weakness isn't explicitly mentioned but it seems clear that this individual is the Fisher King of Arthurian legend whose spiritual unity with the world entails that his internal condition manifests itself in the state of nature – the waste land as such is an expression of a spiritual decay that's taken hold and, more generally, the Fisher King is symbolic of the relationship to the world shared by all of humanity. Meanwhile, the Sweeney that's referenced is a recurring character throughout Eliot's poems and represents the modern man (at that time) coping with the banality of his existence and the frustration of this revealing itself for example in a certain sexual sadism. Sweeney is a man who frequents brothels and the Mrs. Porter mentioned here was a famous madame in Cairo who inspired the Australian troops who used her establishment to change the lyrics of a popular song to one in crass homage to her. In their version, she and her "daughter" wash their genitals rather than their feet. That Sweeney's sexual appetite is associated with spring suggests that desire is what bind us to the cycle (or Wheel to use the tarot symbolism) of rebirth – again, something congruent with the message of Buddha's fire sermon. Lastly, the quote in French here translates as "And O those children's voices, singing in the dome!" This is taken from Verlaine and refers to the conclusion of the grail quest where the Fisher King has been healed and children break out in song singing Christ's praise.

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu

A brief stanza breaks up two other sections of verse now and in it Eliot gives us the song of the nightingale again and a colloquialized repetition of the phrase "So rudely forced" in the form of a slight contraction. It suggests a kind of taunting echo mocking the earnest suffering on display – a kind of sarcastic counterpoint to the voices of the children singing.

Unreal city
Under the brown fog of a winter noon
Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
C.i.f. London: document at sight,
Asked me in demotic French
To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.

Another of one of Madame Sosostris' tarot cards comes into play now – this time it's the one-eyed merchant. One-eyed here can perhaps be interpreted as signifying singlemindedness or desire without perspective. In any case, the subtext of the encounter outlined is that the speaker is solicited for a sexual rendezvous. That this invitation is offered in the form of demotic or "vulgar" French aligns with the overall contrast being drawn throughout the poem between investment in the world and the suffering this entails versus the dim shimmering hope of finally emancipating oneself.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –

I too awaited the expected guest.
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
Bestows one final patronising kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit…

The preceding sexual encounter provides the contemporary equivalent of the rape of Philomela by Tereus, although in this case both sides re-enact their roles in an almost perfunctory way. The rapist now lacks the passion of predation and the victim is so wearied she no longer even offers resistance – the wheel of recurrence has worn down its actors and reduced them to a lifeless state. With this the person of Tiresias is introduced, the central person in the poem. The reason for this is that Tiresias, being male and female, blind and prophetic, is the incarnation of the unity of opposites and the soul in its ultimate state of self-awareness. Tiresias has "foresuffered" all because he has lived out every possible life via the cycles of reincarnation – he has been reborn as every person and died as them, his prophetic powers as such resulting from his memory of how things will inevitably unfold in a deterministic universe. But perceiving the necessity underlying all things also destroys his illusion of choice and so the incarnation that becomes Tiresias is just as helpless as any other incarnation – only without the benefit of ignorance. For Tiresias everything betrays its ultimate emptiness.

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

The typist recovers from her ordeal by an avoidance of mind. She doesn’t acknowledge what has just happened to her, and what will no doubt be repeated, probably because she can’t see any way of changing things. The mundane tragedy of her life though is emblematic of a cosmic process of metempsychosis where enlightenment comes through the erosion of desire by cumulative suffering and the enlightened individual, represented in this case by Tiresias, exists at the center of it all but only as a spectator (And Tiresias’ appearance in the poem is in fact right at the halfway point of the text)

‘This music crept by me upon the waters’
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
O City city, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandolin
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fisherman lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

As the typist begins to play some music the perspective seems to shift to someone outside, overhearing said music. They then offer a short vignette depicting the atmosphere of the neighborhood before continuing on with an extensive meditation regarding the river Thames.

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
The barges wash
Drifting logs

Down Greenwich reach
Past the Isle of Dogs.
Weialala leia
Wallala leialala

Elizabeth and Leicester
Beating oars
The stern was formed
A gilded shell
Red and gold
The brisk swell
Rippled both shores
Southwest wind
Carried down stream
The peal of bells
White towers
Weialala leia
Wallala leialala

Two very different pictures of travelling down a river are offered here. One takes place in industrial London, the other during a leisurely afternoon being enjoyed by members of the aristocracy. In both cases though the same refrain is provided at the end. "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala" is pure nonsense but the meaning here is fairly straightforward – poverty and wealth, suffering and pleasure, all things are equally meaningless.

'Trams and dusty trees.
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.'

'My feet are Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet. After the event
He wept. He promised "a new start".
I made no comment. What should I resent?'

'On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.'
la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

The river imagery gradually evaporates at this point until only meditation remains. Two important elements to note here. The use of the phrase "nothing with nothing" which shows a direct connection to the conversation in section two (line 120) and further emphasizes the pessimism that is reiterated throughout the poem, plus the mentioning of Carthage again. This time Eliot is quoting from St. Augustine but the interpolation of the line "Burning burning burning burning" can't help but conjure up thoughts of the razing of that city at the end of the Third Punic War. In the context of the Buddha's fire sermon, these two allusions only make sense if we interpret them as underlining a divine imperative to purify creation through strife. This is central to Christian theology but here Eliot is illustrating the fact that essentially the same message is shared by eastern traditions. Carthage too is a kind of secular affirmation of this – of the whole world, material and spiritual, being governed by a single eschatological force.

IV. Death by Water

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and the loss.
A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.
Gentile or Jew
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

Two things from the earlier tarot reading are relevant to section four. The Phoenician sailor card, representing the person who underwent Madame Sosostris' reading but more generally the soul on its journey of transmigration, and what is explicit in the section title itself – death by drowning. The significance of water as a life giving agent has been well established in the preceding verses but here its capacity as a life destroying agent comes to the forefront. Even more, it's this duality which requires appreciation because it's fundamentally the same duality which has been ascribed to everything, divine and mundane. Nothing is good or evil to us in itself or within the limits of our powers – rather everything is subordinate to higher fatal impositions. There is no way to flee the waste land then because there's nothing outside it; by trying to escape from it we will only exert ourselves unnecessarily and became ensnared in it anyways. Like with Oedipus. Additionally, the simultaneous contrast and association between the steering wheel of the ship and the whirlpool here deserves attention. Fate encircles us in both and the illusion of choice with the former is dispelled by the superhuman power of the latter. And also, the rising and falling, the passing through the stages of one's age and youth, give us another parallel for the reincarnation process.

V. What the Thunder Said

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience

Opening the final section of his poem with references to Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Eliot then has an undefined narrator obliquely state that Jesus is dead. This prompts the speaker to lamentation; the implication being that with the death of Jesus, living itself has become dying. The darkness of the waste land as such is associated with the spiritual desolation felt by the apostles after the murder of their messiah. No promise of resurrection is offered here, or rather, the

futility of resurrection is implied with the endless cosmic cycle of rebirth. Life and death are one and the same thing. As an additional note, the season of spring is conjured once more – reaffirming the cyclical nature of our spiritual condition. As in genesis, so too in revelation. The beginning and the end.

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses
If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And the dry grass singing
But the sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

The imagery Eliot proceeds to develop in the next two segments of the poem enhances the picture of the waste land further but unlike most of the previous lines, these seem devoid of literary allusions or direct quotation. Nevertheless, we can see that his previous symbolism is still being reiterated throughout. The irony

of Madame Sosostris saying “fear death by water” has become glaring at this point because although water represents death in general, the agonizing thirst for it in the waste land suggests once more that death is a release. We cannot even stop in the waste land – referring allegorically to the relentlessness of life and the absence of tranquility inherent to it – so the peace that’s desired is itself an instrument of excruciation. The waste land dooms us to endless strife and the dream of an unobtainable peace serves this by making us conscious of the spiritual poverty of our condition. Knowing that we will never know peace places us in the same realm of fate as Sisyphus and Tantalus. Eliot’s genius is also on display here, and more subtly than anywhere else perhaps, since the rambling and repetitious speech he uses perfectly captures the delirious mental state of someone dying of thirst in the desert – only in this case Eliot has given us the stream of consciousness of someone suffering from an eternal and unquenchable thirst.

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
– But who is that on the other side of you?

Jesus made several appearances after the resurrection and the writers of Luke and John are strangely insistent on the fact that people had trouble recognizing the newly risen messiah. That people can’t recognize the messiah though supports the already established subordination of human desire to divine will, that even our most basic capacity for knowledge and awareness is contingent on higher powers and, ultimately, on transcendental forces. Although my present stage of analysis is concerned only with interpreting the text of the poem directly, I do feel I need to head off any misunderstanding by referring to Eliot’s notes on The Waste Land for a moment. He says that accounts from an arctic expedition inspired him here and I’m not disputing that – however, in light of the earlier references to Jesus and the obvious parallels with incidents after the resurrection, I think it’s appropriate to infer that there is a mixture of influences at work. Certainly the arctic expedition as a reference by itself doesn’t provide the best interpretation in the broader context of the poem.

What is the sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hoards swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal

The cataclysmic nature of the loss suffered with the death of the messiah is accompanied by natural disaster – as in the gospel accounts themselves. This shows the fundamental unity between the spiritual and material worlds and the fact that the former ultimately has dominion over the latter. That Eliot declares the cities of the earth unreal is consistent with an authentic Christian theology which defines the material world as a purely spiritual creation; as well as with Buddhist theology which defines the material world as a veil of illusions. In both cases, enlightenment requires an apocalypse which destroys the world as we know it.

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted
wells.

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the roof tree
Co co rico co co rico
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust

Bringing rain

The vision of the apocalypse that Eliot presents, starts with a combination of gothic and surrealist imagery centered on a desecrated church. The crowing of a rooster though heralds a deluge.

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder
DA
Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms
DA
Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
DA
Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

The thunder speaks for heaven. For God. The Sanskrit mantra "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata," intoned translates as "Give, sympathize, control," but Eliot is inverting the traditional meaning in an ironic manner. Giving is equated with surrender, meaning not generosity then but compulsion. The concept of sympathy

is undermined by the correlation of the subjective limitations of the self with the condition of being imprisoned – and furthermore the idea of a key, symbolizing freedom, as something that reinforces our sense of imprisonment, paralleling what was explained earlier in regards to the image of peace as an instrument of torment. Lastly, the idea of control is deftly negated by giving us an image of someone rowing a boat in calm waters. Again, our sense of control is contingent on indulgent circumstances and so we have no real control. Our sense of self in general then is grounded first and foremost in a state of delusion and the waste land is the true reality underlying this. Decay is revelation.

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile Fit you. Heironymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

Reaching the end of the poem, the final scene gives us the Fisher King in solitary contemplation. He is the opposite of the sacrificial figure – whereas Jesus for example is sacrificed to give life to others, the Fisher King represents the ordinary state of being needing sustenance through another's sacrifice. Or, to unravel the symbolism completely now, there are two fundamental aspects to the nature of the world – creation and the transcendental source of creation. Creation is dependent in all ways on the source of creation. So the condition of any incarnate being is ultimately one of subordination to fate, to a metaphysical governing reality. Facing up to this though means confronting the waste land in all its immutable starkness. It is the destruction of our childish delusions, the loss of false hope, a confrontation with our ruin, and the refusal to return to self-destroying inventions. London Bridge, Philomela, the Prince of Aquitaine, Heironymo. But we cannot seek true peace through any concrete objective though – our attempts to do so will simply ensnare us in another phantom incarnation of the waste land. Rather true peace is something beyond life and death. Beyond understanding.

Summary

It should be apparent now that despite many assertions by literary critics to the contrary, The Waste Land displays a strong sense of consistency and purpose throughout. From the Sibyl and on, through Tiresias and Heironymo, it is a poem about quietus. It's an expression of antipathy to the world itself at the level of eschatology and not simply in response to Eliot's own age, although certainly the first world war served as a stimulus for this. What we ultimately desire is presented here as something completely beyond our powers and all our efforts in this respect can serve only to increase our misery. The pessimism being illustrated isn't simply grounded in personal afflictions though – Eliot drew on an enormous knowledge of art and history to justify this view of life and a host of cultural references are employed in support of it. In fact, his goal seems to have been to synthesize his condemnation from as much material as possible – striving through that to make it truly definitive. In this he was extraordinarily successful. No poem has ever come even remotely close to incorporating as much apparently incongruent material into something so focused and coherent. That many readers have failed to appreciate this is evidence of the fact that when confronted with surface level contradictions and traditionally unconnected materials, most people will follow the path of least resistance and form their opinions with zero effort made to seek out any deeper unity. But just as the complexity of the physical world disguises general principles of nature, so too The Waste Land, a poem attempting to encompass our entire reality, reveals a pervasive order underneath its outer violence. As such it achieves what only the greatest works of literature can – it transforms the world into a different place and compels us to reconsider our lives accordingly.

Appendix

No author has the final say over the meaning of what they've written. The fact that someone can intend to write a masterpiece and fail is proof enough that intentions can't just be accepted without scrutiny. Still, what any major writer says about their own work is worth serious consideration and Eliot's statements in this regard provide a great deal in support of the opinions in this essay. Drawing also on the content of his other poems and facts about him as a person, I'll endeavor to show how these are all consistent with the interpretations made from my own

textual analysis. That I'd rely on this kind of argument may seem to undermine my own emphasis on maintaining a textual focus but other potential readers are likely to disagree with my strictness in this regard and they may be unreachable by any means except that which they themselves prefer.

The central argument of this essay regarding the general meaning of The Waste Land is that it expresses a fundamental pessimism in relation to existence and life itself. As such it is not simply a disenchantment with the state of humanity and civilization in the aftermath of the first world war. Although immediately following its publication The Waste Land was interpreted by many as a response to the modern condition of things, this is demonstrably false and almost certainly a projection of personal anxieties shared by less profound minds on a work they didn't adequately comprehend – if nothing else the fact that Eliot relied equally on ancient and medieval literature and history in the material The Waste Land synthesizes should be enough for us to dismiss such ideas. Rather we can quote his own later critical judgement of the poem as "…the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" as supporting the position developed so far. That Eliot outgrew his pessimism is evident in the transition from The Hollow Men (the nadir of his pessimism) to Ash Wednesday, which ends in a positive affirmation of a divinity and personal supplication to it, but his later attitude to his earlier work is nevertheless consistent with the interpretation this essay provides.

Further confirmation is obtained if we consider Eliot's famous notes that have accompanied The Waste Land since its first publication in book form. Although few of them are genuinely explanatory, those that are do illuminate some serious difficulties and those that merely reference sources can still be used productively to appreciate the subtext within the poem. Of the former, the note for line 218 is the most explicit and asserts in a straightforward manner the crucial function of Tiresias as the unifying figure of the poem. The references Eliot takes from Ovid's Metamorphoses meanwhile, both those he acknowledges (99) and those he doesn't (30), add more weight to the idea of the whole poem as a series of metamorphoses in line with a cosmology governed by reincarnation. Hence the prophetic condition of "foresuffering" through a consciousness of previous lives. Likewise, the quote from F.H. Bradley in another note (411) presents the world in solipsistic terms as an inherently private manifestation. This too is consistent with the cosmology that's been established for The Waste Land. Likewise, an early title for the poem taken from Dickens (He Do the Police in Different Voices) makes it

clear that the underlying unity of separate personas was always embedded in the structure of the work – this essay simply takes that to its logical conclusion using the context of additional philosophical and mythological references.

Admittedly there are many literary allusions in The Waste Land, both those that are mentioned in Eliot's notes and those that aren't, which this essay hasn't attempted to address, but they are not critical to the general interpretation of the poem so I will leave them for the interested reader to investigate themselves. Something should be said however about the consistency evident throughout Eliot's work up to the writing of The Waste Land; specifically in regards to his use of symbolism. At the end of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock for example the poem concludes with the following lines:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown

The dualistic employment of water as a symbol of life and death which pervades The Waste Land is present here too. Interestingly, the drowning that's spoken of occurs not from the simple fact of being underwater but rather from being woken up by intruding voices. Again, a correlation is made between death and tranquility – the drowning as such results from being thrown back into the false life of reincarnation. Similarly, the poem Gerontion (originally intended by Eliot as a preface to The Waste Land) deals with the conflict between thirst and dryness versus water and annihilation. The concept of the waste land then is of inescapable thirst that can never be sated – only prolonged in misery through temporary indulgences. The desire for life as antithetical to life, something that's notably consistent with the paradoxical emphases of Christianity.

The Waste Land does not offer us a vision of redemption however. The final mantra of "Shantih shantih shantih" signifies only the unfathomable nature of what we truly desire – the transcendence of desire itself. Purpose, as something that must be grounded in constructive action, is fundamentally incompatible with what is presented to us by Eliot as cosmologically immutable. Within all the chaos and mutations of the universe, the inhuman nature of the violence that rules it all, the dreamed gods unaffected by our pleas, there is nothing to build on. Later he would find salvation through "peace in His will" but in a time of personal despair, T.S. Eliot confronted that feeling of emptiness and made a monument from it. Out of this

defiance then a kind of creation ex nihilo took place. As he would later say “And I who am here disassembled / Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love / To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.” Staring into the heart of the waste land, what greater affirmation of creation could there be than a creative act even in the midst of such desolation?

THE MYSTERIES OF THE IMAGE

Art is older than civilization. Thousands of years before the birth of cities and farming and law, primitive humanity scrawled dreams across the rough surfaces of cavern walls and carved its dim imaginings into random scraps of wood and stone. Why? What primordial impulse led our early ancestors to seek out these forms of expression? Unlike other technological and cultural developments where we can point to specific external factors spurring human ingenuity, art seems to have its origin in the sheer desire for creative fulfillment. Of course one can devise theories of sympathetic magic and superstition to account for this or that particular artifact, one can for example try to explain the drawings of gazelles covering a cave as serving some esoteric psychological purpose, but do we really need to invent explanations here? Looking within ourselves and the inherent satisfaction we take in creative forms of expression, it seems reasonable to infer that a continuity of human nature extends between us and them – that they too enjoyed the thrill of reshaping the world with representations of personal desire.

Admittedly, not everyone is as passionate about expressing themselves this way. The artistic inclination, like all others, is distributed in different degrees among different individuals. When we consider art in its role as something to be shared and consumed however, we're immediately confronted with its vital importance to society. Human relationships and community depend on the collective aspirations and values which traditionally arose out of mythological narratives; creations whose powers were contingent on their artistic execution. Even today, brief references to works of art, to films, television, books, music, etcetera, pervade our daily interactions with others and provide us with much of the substance of our communication. So instead of using legends and fables as our predecessors did, we

now orient ourselves in the business of life through a milieu of relevant and contemporary artistic works. Some are even survivors from antiquity since they so perfectly captured what it is they symbolize – I'm thinking in this instance of something like the continuing referential significance of Icarus for example. Of course new symbols are endlessly being generated and whether they manage to achieve any cultural currency is something decided by a process very much akin to natural selection. Some works of art attain enormous reach in their own times and then rapidly disappear from the public consciousness, others are initially dismissed and ignored before going on to establish themselves as canonical achievements. This brings me to the mystery I wish to address. What is it about certain works of art that gives them their power?

Since art encompasses so much, and any discussion of it can quickly unspool into endless tangents, I feel it's best to begin by setting a limit on the scope of inquiry. When we think of an image we are conjuring something that's totally provided to us – by definition an image is a superficial construct without any essential physical structure behind its two dimensional form. At the same time this doesn't mean that the true content of an image is similarly obvious and when a painting or picture has any real hold over us, it's generally accompanied by some feeling of uncertainty. A great painting is intriguing – it grips us and what keeps our stare fixed to it is the sense that there's something more we can receive from it. Some deeper appreciation. The pursuit of truth here tries to facilitate that experience and one of the most crucial questions to answer is why any particular work should continue to exercise a fascination over multiple generations.

Art is fundamentally spiritual in the sense that it gives incarnation to the spirit of its creator at the moment of creation. To partake in art is in fact to participate in the same dynamic force that summoned existence out of the primordial void at the beginning of the universe. Whether or not the artist consciously appreciates this kinship, it's there and intrinsic to every variety of creative endeavor. Ideally, when we learn about art we should be able to take what we are gaining and invest it in other areas of our lives. The insights about specific characters that we might obtain from a great novel for instance can be applied to our own social interactions. With paintings and other purely visual art forms this kind of practical value may seem less likely but I'm a firm believer in the principle that the value of art is proportional to the impact it has on our daily existence. Because of this, another one of our goals should be to relate individual works of art

being considered to contemporary situations in a utilitarian manner. This won't always be in the form of decision adjusting realizations though. Often the best thing that art can do is simply rejuvenate us, rejuvenate our energy and sense of possibility, and this results from a spiritual transference. We feel what someone else felt, we understand what someone else has come to understand in the same intimate way they did. Only art can provide this. Uniquely in art, the full potential of human spirituality and meaning is unleashed.

In considering the nature of meaning, the function of religion is especially important to comprehend since it once provided the universal foundations for this in many different cultures. Plus there was never religion without art. Religions after all are fairly consistent in ascribing a narrative significance to the cosmos and to adequately express any narrative one must inevitably resort to artistic forms of expression. There are periods in history then where the majority of art was religious art and naturally so since art becomes especially relevant wherever a spiritual state of preoccupation takes hold. Here we can start to peel away the numerous sheaths of thoughtless being that tend to obscure the poetic cores of consciousness and desire. Consciousness is being aware and the only way to be consistent with this fundamental aspect of ourselves is to perpetuate our own consciousness, our awareness, expanding it to its greatest potential. In past forms of human society, religions had virtual monopolies over this. Often when said religions reached a state of social pre-eminence they'd react against artistic freedom as if it were a malignant distraction from greater religious devotion. Then a purging of art from society would be attempted. These schemes to impose a vision of absolute order on society always failed though because religion itself is an expression of the creative spirit and so when it's used to stifle creative expression it engages in futile strife with the source of its own strength. Religion, like art, is ultimately a vehicle for human desire. Its existence is utterly contingent on the human impulse for it to continue to do so. And now that we live in pluralist societies within an increasingly multicultural world, human desire and its appetite for increased consciousness confronts the new challenge of unrestricted freedom. Whereas meaning was previously organized for everyone within specific orthodoxies, the responsibility now explicitly falls to each individual to choose everything for themselves. That said, art remains central to this process since it's still the sole arena in which human beings can wrestle with their whole reality.

The progress of time always carries with it the realization of inherent possibilities and so we can speak about it as a process of revelation. Similarly, the history of art is also a history of revelation, an unfolding of human nature into the light of understanding. By truly appreciating art in the context of its animating principles we can come to know ourselves and the world more profoundly – in its destiny so to speak rather than through partial segments. However, the whole picture is built up from the interrelations of its individual elements so every element must be comprehended on its own to some degree if their totality is to make any sense. We find ourselves then in a predicament like that of an anatomist trying to reconstruct the nature of an animal from random pieces of bone. Every work of art, every expression of human creativity, is a piece of this mystery and the greater their individual influence the more of the mystery they'll reveal. Whatever spiritual reality exists must inevitably be composed of spiritual elements and these we have free access to in the artistic achievements of the past and those yet to come. All together they will give us an anatomy of the divine.

THE SHEIK LOTFOLLAH MOSQUE CEILING

Why is it that in so many different religious belief systems, the chief god was located in the sky? Sophisticated modern theologians will probably answer by saying that the concept of a “heavenly” father is merely a primitive superstition – if they don’t have a postmodern religious outlook that reduces God to a purely epistemic category then they might characterize God as wholly transcendent and so locate God nowhere, or they might characterize God as utterly immanent and then locate God everywhere. Doing either of these however they’ll usually avoid addressing the real question of why people traditionally conceived of their primary deities as dwelling far above them. Not only do I think an explanation is easily obtainable here but I also believe that ancient peoples had profound instincts. Humans often measure things according to difficulty. Lifting a larger weight, solving a more complicated equation, in all cases where we identify superiority, we do so by assessing the relative efforts of particular achievements. The greater the challenge overcome the greater the achievement. As our values evolve of course we emphasize different things in different degrees, brute strength for example is much less highly esteemed in our technological age than intelligence and creativity, but still we are just recontextualizing a longstanding emphasis on difficulty. The most powerful god then would presumably reside in the most unreachable place and so the force of gravity naturally influenced how many of our early cosmologies would be structured. It’s therefore more than just the fact that life giving sunlight and rain happened to fall from above – it’s the fundamental orientations of our striving and surrender aligned according to the basic forces in the world.

It’s natural then to look up in reverence. If you observe people who’ve been raised in certain traditional religious backgrounds you’ll often notice them do this

when they pray or otherwise think of God. No doubt it's usually done unconsciously but rather than slighting this practice as a leftover anachronism from a more ignorant time, we do better to truly appreciate it. We feel differently looking up at something – especially something immense. Walk into any building with a high ceiling and you can personally experience this for yourself. Places of worship naturally take advantage of that and you don't have to go to the Sistine Chapel to indulge your spiritual appetite here. One of the greatest uses of the inspiring ceiling is the subject of this essay – the interior of the dome of the Sheik Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Relying on the potential for emotional resonance contained in pure geometrical abstraction, the dome of the mosque is magnificently joyful in its splendor. Radiating from the serrated borders of a dense spherical nest of vine-like bronze pattern work, the mosque's domed ceiling is covered with interconnected undulating streams of golden tiles interspersed with spaces shaped like leaves that are filled with multicolored arabesque designs. These increase in size as their rows expand around the core and the interiors of each shape evolve as well, developing increasingly rich interiors. The overall effect is mesmerizing but to fully appreciate the ceiling's design one has to understand a few things first about the historical role of art in Islam and some philosophical issues this entails.

Idolatry has always been a central concern for all three of the Abrahamic religions. Among these faiths however it has provided an especially strong formative influence on the various cultures that adopted Islam as their religion and this, most notably, in art. The term "Islamic Art" has been derided as a misnomer by some recent commentators on account of the vast diversity of societies and eras that it encompasses but there are obvious enough parallels in evidence between these to dismiss this kind of criticism. The use of arabesque patterns for example has remained consistent over many centuries. Admittedly the struggle with idolatry involved fluctuating levels of tolerance for imagery in Islamic art but the overall effect has been consistent enough to channel generations of creative energy into non-figurative art forms. Without claiming that non-figurative art is spiritually superior to figurative art we can still admit that it has a unique contribution to make in the context of spirituality. The problem of idolatry furthermore illuminates this fact. Human beings have always suffered from a sensory bias over the intellect and reason. Of course this is predictable – we've been conditioned by the imperatives of survival to interpret the world primarily in a concrete manner rather than through abstraction. As such we still tend to think of physical things for example as composed of solid substances, instead of ephemeral subatomic interactions,

despite the basic scientific facts that have established otherwise. Similarly, human beings are prone to invest their spiritual appetites in material objects because this is easier and more natural to the majority than satisfying themselves with an immaterial spirituality. That said, spirituality is in its essence immaterial – it's concerned with the ultimate animating forces that underlie every particular form of incarnation and so it cannot be consummated in material achievements. This is why in all genuine spiritual practices there is some level of renunciation of worldly gains. Just as an icon is at best a means to spiritual understanding, so too the material world is understood in religious terms as a vehicle for spiritual realization. Beyond this it is a hindrance.

At its extreme, primitive materialism resulted in the literal deification of material things. The fetishizing in question moreover progressed from polytheistic nature worship to reverence for human artifacts as our ingenuity increased. Hence idolatry. In reaction to this trend though one finds, especially in the initial awakenings of monotheistic spiritual movements and their periodic rejuvenations, an opposing iconoclastic tendency. While these reactionary instances were mostly just as blind to the deeper spiritual issues as their fetishist counterparts, nevertheless they provided a necessary opposing force in the meantime. Because while iconoclasm itself results from an overemphasis on imagery, on the negative influence of the image, it still serves to sustain a cultural consciousness of the fact that a preoccupation with material things is spiritually destructive. We are slowly transformed through all our acts of conformity and so if we ground ourselves in the material world, we will inevitably weaken our spiritual capacities – just as favoring one group of muscles over another will cause the second to atrophy. Once we understand the true nature of spirituality though we are immunized against both idolatry and iconoclasm since both represent a primitive preoccupation with material concerns. And to some degree this is the current state of things. The majority of people no longer prostrate themselves before statues they imagine to be incarnations of an actual god and the destruction of one religious group's artifacts by another is almost as rare. Still, the problem of idolatry is not entirely overcome since the perverse confusions it represents still show themselves at work in human affairs.

One of the main ways we learn is by imitating those around us. That isn't necessarily something to disparage but it's frequently the source of obstructions to true spirituality. Because, as a result of this, people often, elevate conformity to

outer modes of convention above a fidelity to the spirit, or inner focus, of whatever practice they're adopting. So, for example, they conflate becoming a great artist with emulating the style of a great artist rather than the passion and appetite for original forms of expression that actually define great art. Likewise, on a spiritual level, they place more emphasis on following the rules that they've codified around their particular religious movements rather than the inward spiritual sincerity that marks the character of all those who've discovered and preached profound spiritual truths. This general tendency to mistake exterior conditions for the source of desirable consequences can be summarized under the concept of the cargo cult phenomenon. Various pacific island cultures, encountering advanced technology for the first time in the twentieth century, began to emulate the behaviors they saw which brought valuable airdrops and plane landings. Consequently they built their own crude approximations of airports and started to ritualistically practice the behaviors they'd seen. But this was only an empty and superficial simulation of what they were trying to replicate – so too all forms of idolatry are merely an unconscious self-enslavement of the mind to hollow deities in an attempt to reach the true spiritual reality we are always surrounded in.

The question spiritual art must answer then is how to communicate the infinite and spiritual within the medium of the finite and mundane? Obviously the infinite cannot be fully portrayed since it transcends the limits of worldly representation and, accordingly, an authentic manner of expression here will itself inevitably transcend representative constraints. The infinite as such must be communicated abstractly – at first through symbolism and metaphor perhaps but ultimately in the essence of its abstractness. The infinite is fundamentally a potentiality as much as it is an actuality since it's the power which generates all particular forms of incarnation. For this fact to be communicated to anyone though it must be translated into a language that is comprehensible to them – meaning it must assume some concrete form that nevertheless undermines the false impression that concrete reality is the whole of reality. One way to achieve this is by creating visual works that have no earthly analogy. Works that will lead the thinking individual to the contemplation of the sublime. With the ceiling of the Sheik Lotfollah Mosque, we are provided with a masterful example of a spiritual achievement of this exact kind.

WILLIAM BLAKE'S "THE TEMPTATION AND FALL OF EVE"

Innocence lost can never be recovered. Though it's not something people generally desire to return to, this doesn't diminish the pain and frustration which accompany these experiences. Awakening to the many harsh realities of the world is an inevitable part of maturing as a person, yet it can still carry with it a powerful sense of regret. Knowledge and freedom are frequently burdens; they're capable of imposing hard choices on us and, given that, the feelings this incites naturally find expression in various ways within the arts. The most famous example here would have to be the story of Adam and Eve which, beyond its central role in all three Abrahamic religions, continues to provide an artistic motif in the broader domains of human discourse. Adam and Eve are archetypes for the inconstancy of personal commitments, for the disharmony between the sexes and, for penitence in the wake of one's self-destructive actions. Even without granting them any historical status, they nevertheless retain a symbolic vitality that's yet to be exhausted. And this is really more important. Fiction often has greater value than fact. That Aesop's fables are pure fantasies for instance doesn't detract from their moral insights. Conversely, an anecdote from the life of a real person with nothing instructive in it is of no use to anyone. So let's proceed with that in mind.

Art affords us with countless depictions of Adam and Eve. One can choose from such eminent artists as Michelangelo and Titian and Durer to name only a few. Perhaps no one has ever devoted themselves to biblical themes with more a striking originality though than the painter-poet William Blake. Spending his entire life in relative obscurity, Blake's reputation in the twentieth century finally reached the level of appreciation he was due and now he's widely acknowledged as a genius of the highest rank for both his visual and literary creations. The Temptation and

Fall of Eve however is not one of his best known works so it may seem like a strange selection for one of these essays given all the more prominent images in the history of art. To that objection I'll offer the following in my defense: first, this essay is primarily concerned with the influential significance of art and the continuous duplication of the iconography here, of Adam and Eve in Eden even without one artist's version dominating over the others, attests to the immensity of the influence in question. Second, Blake's version is the most eloquent of all these in my opinion. As my analysis of the illustration will show, Blake is much more penetrating in his use of details and goes farther in illuminating the core concepts at issue than anyone else. Michelangelo included. Third, while some of Blake's paintings and illustrations are less familiar than others, his body of work is certainly immortal and his style so distinctive and recognizable that this by itself elevates his versions of traditional subjects in comparison with other artists. In any case, what matters most in the end is that the work under consideration affords us with worthwhile discoveries and these will be provided in abundance; as if they were plucked from the tree of knowledge itself.

As the title of the work indicates, the blame for the transgression against God is squarely placed on Eve. The standard interpretation in Christian theology until recently, this was used to reinforce an ideology of male superiority because the account in Genesis supposedly indicated that women were more susceptible to evil. Of course there were various justifications used to support the patriarchy of earlier generations but, as one would expect, the bias against women demanded something foundational that'd provide an ultimate argument for the subordination of one sex to another. Ironically this narrative actually does a lot to undermine its own purpose – although I'm not familiar with anyone previously pointing this fact out. Consider the nature of responsibility however. Blaming Eve for the fall of humanity implicitly bestows her with a greater status than Adam. After all, responsibility is proportional to capability. The fact that Adam is often relegated to the role of a naïve victim strongly undermines the traditional narrative of the superiority of the male sex even while it was being perpetuated by those who believed in that very delusion. To be wrong of course is to be illogical, wrongness arises from errors of reason, so it's to be expected that those in thrall to a false outlook would commit other mistakes in reasoning as well. What's interesting about Blake's illustration is that he seems to have intuitively captured some of this. As an admirer of Blake's work, I wish I could ascribe this to some kind of foresight

on his part but, despite his many radical liberal beliefs, it's my impression he wasn't especially forward thinking when it came to the equality of women.

Nevertheless, Blake does Eve the honor of granting her pride of place. It's not just that the title of the work only mentions her by name – it also places her at the forefront of the composition and drama while consigning Adam off to the side. In fact, Adam is literally turned around, as if to accentuate his unimportance in the cosmic tragedy occurring behind him. His body language and the expression on his face go even farther in emphasizing his utter lack of vigor and presence – instead he's depicted as simply staring at the world with childish wonder. Eve meanwhile cradles the serpent entwining itself around her with both arms. There's a look of distance in her eyes but her body unambiguously communicates the fact that she is the primary actor in this composition. Contrast this now with other depictions of the same moment. While some convey a measure of equality with respect to their arrangements of Adam and Eve, Blake's is the only one I've come across that makes Eve preeminent.

Also deserving commendation is how Blake depicts the tree of knowledge. Other artists rendered it straightforwardly like any other tree but Blake invents something far more in tune with the role of the tree of knowledge in terms of its symbolic function. What previous artists failed to express was the duality of knowledge at issue – the simultaneous allure and trepidation it can inspire. Before the penetration of any significant mystery there's always the uncertainty of what will ensue from this and in the story of Eve's temptation we find her choosing between the inevitable death warned of by God and the apotheosis promised by the serpent (it should be recognized that these two things needn't be mutually exclusive though and undergoing death as a requirement for spiritual elevation is entirely consistent with various teachings in Christianity; including of course the example of Jesus) In Blake's rendition of the tree he succeeds in portraying this by two strongly contrasting elements – the body of the tree with its gnarled roots and trunk, serrated with immense thorns, and the fruit of tree on the other hand which are warm and soft and luminous. Trying to communicate this naturalistically would be impossible and Blake's visionary imagination certainly proves its exceptional merits in this regard.

The cataclysmic nature of the moment is likewise better underscored by the color palette Blake uses – the strong contrast between the dismal blacks and grays

of the background versus the brighter figures of the two human actors. This is typical of his work so I wouldn't go so far as to say he consciously selected this in this particular instance but rather that his style was superbly adapted to the apocalyptic circumstances and themes he often gravitated towards. That there should be a unity between content and form in art is manifestly attested to by its greatest achievements and, somewhat strangely, the story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace is rarely presented in a manner that adequately imparts the mood of the situation. Often artists give us idyllic scenes in this regard and even Michelangelo, although he manages to produce a not inconsiderable amount of tension and emotion with his version in the Sistine Chapel, is certainly surpassed by Blake in this regard. The serenity of Blake's figures in fact seem to magnify the power and crisis of the scene in conjunction with the looming menace of their environment. We perceive the loss of innocence and purity that much more acutely through the gentle nature of the surrender that's transpiring and, with the gloom and sinister atmosphere that's evoked, a perfect balance is struck between capitulation and violence. This is the choice after all which dooms all of humanity to suffer outside the walls of God's paradise until death and we should expect any art that addresses this to encompass the magnitude of that event. What the artist provides us with in this case is a testimony to the profoundness of his acumen and the delicate sensitivity he has with respect to human tragedy. As a man whose career was fraught with stifling neglect, he certainly had the personal experience to draw from.

Up to this point I've said almost nothing about the principle agent of evil in the Adam and Eve story but I'll do so now. Again, Blake excels others in his depiction of the serpent. The bestial delight it takes in Eve receiving the fruit from its beak is exquisitely rendered and the erotic aspect of the temptation is fantastically summarized in the sublimely deft touches on display. The amount of physical contact the iridescent villain of the drama has with Eve is unusual and does much to illustrate the seduction at the heart of the narrative. Similarly the vivid colors of the serpent in contrast to the paleness of Adam and Eve speaks to the chaos and vitality in the freedom that knowledge unleashes, something consistent with Blake's poetic works, where he says in the argument at the beginning of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, "*Without contraries there is no progression*," and "*Evil is the active springing from Energy.*" The fruit of the tree of knowledge then is the real substance of life – not just a hollow immortality preserved in the confines of a dull and idle utopia but a life enriched with the full potentiality of experience.

Which inevitably includes elements of jeopardy. It's easy in this light to construe Blake as an apologist for immorality but like Milton, his most personally influential poetic predecessor, he's simply depicting evil in a more thorough and honest way while conceding its essential importance in the initial awakening our spiritual consciousness. Alright, there's one more detail I'd like to add about the serpent before moving on. Note the cockscomb on its head – a symbol synonymous with vanity. Using this, Blake makes explicit the identification of the serpent with Lucifer (something we can't take for granted with Blake since his theology is largely self-formulated) and in doing so he connects the downfall of the original human pair with that of the rebel angel. There's an allusion in all this to the idea of evil as something like a communicable disease or, to stay within Blake's vocabulary, an energy, perpetuating itself through social dynamics.

Everyone passes through a time of innocence and in doing so we all make our mistakes. Among these the most significant are those that help to shape our moral awareness. No one can live a full life without having injured someone else and regretted doing so or otherwise betrayed some principle that they knew they should've adhered to. Whatever wisdom we possess in the end will come from our wrestling with our own ignorance and reflecting on our lives with sincerity. It's part of growing a conscience. It's inescapable – there's no freedom without the possibility of transgression. How can you be free unless you're free to choose evil? Granting this, the necessity of creating a world in which evil is possible becomes evident assuming only that the spiritual development of the individual is a worthy enough purpose. In the story of Adam and Eve, we find the predicament of possessing choice without understanding presented in earnest mythopoetic form and Blake subsequently giving visual expression to this with the greatest fidelity. We cannot be surprised then that either the story itself or Blake's work should exercise their respective influences over multiple generations – whatever gives a universal condition of humanity an unusually potent formulation is guaranteed to find lasting esteem. The art surest to endure is the art which nourishes humanity's most profound appetites.

WHO I WRITE FOR

It's wrong to construe writing as an inherently social activity. Yes, it's a way for people to communicate. However it's also an art form in and of itself, meaning that every aspect of writing that's susceptible to judgement and improvement can be a matter of utterly solitary conscience. Consider a sculptor stranded alone on a deserted island. Can't they develop their talent and refine their appreciation of sculpture in the absence of any society? Obviously. And the same is true of writing. Because language is so widely conflated with interpersonal relationship though, the prevailing prejudice tends to run against this kind of thinking. Rather the value of writing is held to be something that can only be settled by the debate of the majority – that even where a work of literature has a merely niche appeal, its worth must still be determined by some form of collective opinion. This might seem to be a self-evident truth consistent with a democratic theory of culture but it's not. In fact, opinions in sympathy with this position have a genuinely malignant impact on society – they're aligned with the forces of cultural decay.

If you were to take the Mona Lisa and put it in a pit full of chimpanzees, what's the likely outcome of this? A desecrated work of art. Shall we attribute that to some failure on the part of Da Vinci? Would a greater painting fare better? Of course not. As far as we know, chimpanzees simply lack the capacity to appreciate art. The inadequacy is wholly theirs. We shouldn't feel too superior however because our own inadequacies differ only by degrees. Perhaps the average person isn't going to destroy something simply because they can't appreciate it but that doesn't diminish the failure on their part to grasp whatever was valuable in the hypothetical subject in question. It could be a scientific insight from a research paper, it could be a new invention in a musical composition – what's important has nothing to do with the specifics here but what the possibility of this, by itself, means in general. It means we're all in a predicament. No matter how intelligent or

knowledgeable we are, we can be assured of the fact that there'll always be higher realms of intellect and knowledge beyond our present means of appreciation. The question then is how to improve ourselves so that we can ascend higher into the skies of genius. And how do we distinguish improvement from a failure to achieve that? What's maybe the most essential fact to recognize is that we face a matter of personal responsibility here.

Hence the basic untruthfulness inherent in assigning society the role of determining the worth of anything. Writing especially. Whether or not we happen to be fortunate enough to find ourselves in an age of artistic and cultural seriousness, we'll know that it'll nevertheless be inadequate to the appreciation of some level of creative achievement. So upholding majority opinion as the basis for determining truth is blatantly irresponsible. It's to literally renounce a responsibility that all of us have as individuals. Naturally it's not a black or white situation. The problem as I perceive it though is that while most people might acquiesce in principle to the main points I've made, in practice they demonstrate little fidelity to their own better judgement. So much culture is dominated by politics, not in the sense that it's concerned with mobilizing people or anything like that, but rather that it's pathologically preoccupied with navigating a labyrinth of trite opinions ranked according to sham criterions of authority. I say pathologically because by investing in the importance of inconsequential things, people deprive themselves of what has real value. And this contributes to decay. If people don't meaningfully engage culture in private reflection then they can only learn about culture from others. And where said people are themselves instructed by people similarly lacking in personal engagement, then a lineage of imposture begins to unfold itself. Creativity ultimately arises from the private depths of the creative individual and therefore a sincere appreciation of it requires an equally deep and private sincerity in the act of contemplation. When culture becomes externally grounded in the theatricality and one-upmanship of public discourse conversely, it loses its connection to the very source from which all its vitality emanates.

I've been speaking abstractly so far about the problem I'm addressing but let me offer a few concrete instances as well. Keats for example was savaged by some of the most esteemed critics of his age. And whereas he died unmercifully young, William Blake spent an entire lifetime in extraordinary underappreciation. Even stranger, the genius of John Donne was recognized in his own time but then sank into relative neglect until being re-evaluated during the twentieth century. In the

field of fiction, the careers of writers as diverse as James Joyce, Philip K. Dick, and Franz Kafka were never commensurate with the quality of the work they produced. During the nineteenth century a peerless trio of world historical philosophers – Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche – all of them masterful prose stylists and worthy of immortality on the merits of their literary abilities alone, were relegated to obscurity in preference for who knows how many nameless mediocrities. In the hard sciences as well, where the relative absence of subjectivity seems to afford a better record of contemporary judgements, the lives of the mathematicians George Cantor and Srinivasa Ramanujan demonstrate that even genius quantitatively proven can be ignored with absurd determination by a sufficiently hostile intellectual establishment. It also goes unmentioned far too often the fact that Einstein's job as a patent clerk was something he barely managed to secure and that he was pushed to the edge of despair in his early years. Yet his name would become synonymous with genius.

Admittedly the argument that history suffers from systemic injustice shouldn't shock anyone. The famous artist or intellectual neglected in their own time is common enough that it's become proverbial. Answering why this is and why it's so prevalent goes a long way though towards illuminating a significant flaw in our culture. Again, I return to the superficiality that holds ordinary thinking hostage. Instead of connecting with the profoundness of great art by deep introspection, people develop the habit of gratifying themselves with shallow opinions. Naturally they don't want to see their own judgements in this light and to shield themselves from the truth they frequently resort to rhetorical ingenuity at the expense of substance. Unfortunately this only provides a surface complexity. It's like painting an optical illusion inside an empty box in order to make it look like it's filled with content. You might think that this kind of fraud is easily exposed by people of substance but the reality is that sophistry can always be mass produced faster than authenticity and the sophists tend to be mutually supportive of one another. This then creates a cultural environment based not on merit but sycophancy, cronyism, and nepotistic preferment. Writers then can advance their careers through purely ideological allegiances and flattering those in positions of authority. As the contagion spreads through a brute multiplication in the ranks of society, it gradually creates an environment more and more antithetical to serious intellectual work. To survive among chimpanzees, a single human being would have to become a chimpanzee themselves. So too genius is capable of being drowned out by stupidity. Just as the mightiest trees can be choked and destroyed as

seedlings by a swarm of weeds, intelligence can be stifled by the sheer numerical superiority of ignorance. In this way, a flourishing culture, a culture where the intellectual leaders of society inspire people in large numbers with challenging achievements, is itself the result of democracy. In place of a democracy of apathy and stagnant self-satisfaction though, it's a vigorous democracy of dynamic striving and earnest enterprise.

In summary, what writing requires to retain its vitality as an art form are writers who challenge the public with work that inspires self-improvement and a reading public eager to improve itself through the challenge of literature. Without both these elements thriving in the hearts of people, culture degenerates. And this hinges on the pre-eminence of individuality in society. Vitality isn't found in the exterior considerations of social reciprocation; it depends on a self-searching creative devotion that can only enter society as a second order function of the individual achieving their own highest realization. The naïve view that prevails is that society is best served by some kind of deference to a system of socially grounded authority but this kind of crude directness is like devouring a seed instead of planting it. Society reaps the most dividends when it moves farthest from systems of coercion, deception, and superficiality. When it frees and unleashes the natural creative potential of the individual instead of resorting to poverty and other forms of artifice. History testifies to the fact that people achieve their greatest creative output when they're liberated from fear and want; in an environment that rewards exploration. Before anyone can make a lasting contribution to civilization then, they must first become an individual.

Accordingly I write for individuals. I write for people to whom every book is a personal message from the author to themselves. I write for people who wrestle one on one with the untiring angels of new ideas. I write for those who dwell alone in paradise and those who dwell alone in hell. I write for people who can live as an outcast lives and never consider themselves an outcast. I write for people who don't wait for others to tell them who they should be. I write for those who free themselves from being lost by abandoning false obligations and those who choose to starve until they outlive their desires and those who invite their own madness in the face of deathly sanities. I write for people who have a passion for the words that they never hear on another's lips.

To me these are the only people worth writing for.