NUMINOUS MACHINES



CHRISTOPHER PANKHURST

FOREWORD BY KERRY BOLTON

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by

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USE ONLY TAP WATER

Charles Krafft, *Aleister Crowley Hot Water Bottle,* 2010, porcelain, private collection

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FOREWORD

This collection of Christopher Pankhurst's essays will—or should—provide the groundwork from which springs an ongoing and lively dialectic for many years, one that has the potential to redefine much about the New Right in the Anglosphere and further afield. What Pankhurst has achieved is the articulation of a philosophy that is quite unique at a time when one might wonder whether there is anything unique left to say. Like any genuine work of philosophy, it prompts many questions, and therefore provokes—literally *provokes*—one to think, and in directions that are usually left derelict by the Right.

Pankhurst's intention is to describe the numinous—the spirit—as the inspiration behind history and culture. He starts with Oswald Spengler, an eminently worthy beginning, augmented by Francis Parker Yockey. Explaining the fundamentals of Spengler's doctrine of culture morphology and Yockey's doctrine of culture distortion, Pankhurst makes the important point that the maladies of the Western Civilization ascribed to Jewish influences by Yockey, are symptoms, not causes. Pankhurst deals with the problem of what Spengler calls the "Second Religiousness": an attempt to revive the numinous when people tire of materialism. There is no sign of it. It seems Western Civilization missed the proverbial boat in terms of a revival of any type, and additionally that the "imperium" that normally appears as the last hurrah of a Civilization on the world historical stage, according to Spengler (and Yockey) was distorted instead into a US-led money empire: that is, instead of new "Caesars" in the Spenglerian sense overthrowing the rule of money, money won, and Western Civilization will continue to devour itself without a revivalist interregnum.

Pankhurst raises the question as to whether there is anything of Western Civilization left to "save," and even whether it should be "saved." What is more likely is a post-Western culture. Pankhurst directs his attention towards what the new forms of a post-Western culture might be, starts with music, and moves on to the visual arts. As an end aim, to revive the tradition of a bygone High Culture is to reanimate a corpse and claim victory by creating a zombie. Actually Spengler also dealt with such matters, and stated that Western Civilization has nothing more great to create in the arts. Beyond this, Pankhurst sees the continuance of the Faustian soul after the demise of the West as a timeless spirit that can manifest a new culture that Pankhurst suggests will most readily grow from small rural communities, eschewing the decay of the cosmopolitan, rootless megalopolis. The search is for the way of uncovering the sources that will impel

the new culture: Pankhurst considers the transcendence of Nietzsche, the primal spirit of Sibelius, the sublimity of the composer Arvo Pärt, and the composer James MacMillan, who relates the saga of his fellow Scott, the witch Isobel Gowdie. The chapter on Giacinto Scelsi, a reclusive aristocrat, should prompt the reader to listen to this obscure composer who, like Pärt, provides a glimpse of a post-Western culture. Pankhurst says of Scelsi: “His music expresses the darker, more unnerving aspects of mysticism with which most people are uncomfortable. It is at once beautiful and threatening.” Perhaps this is precisely what the numinous dichotomy of a post-Western culture will be: “beautiful and threatening”; a new dialectic.

David Myatt will probably not be familiar to most readers, but whether as a “Satanist,” a National Socialist, a Muslim, or a follower of the “Numinous Way,” his life-quest has been in search of the numinous, and he also developed a neo-Spenglerian morphology of history called “Aeonics,” reflecting the nexus between casual and acausal. Drawing on an array of subjects such as novelist Alan Garner, who writes of the mythic landscape, visual artist Damien Hirst, Coomaraswarmy, Crowley, Austin Osman Spare, and Mishima, Pankhurst considers a gamut of philosophical questions from life to death, posing seldom asked but crucial questions on the destiny of the European after the West’s demise. The book will hopefully become a seminal source for a Right that really is “New.”

Kerry Bolton
Summer Solstice, 2017

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Only two of the works in this volume—the stories "The Yoke" and "The Grey Wood"—are previously unpublished.

The following essays were first published at Counter-Currents/*North American New Right*: "Music of the Future," "*Parsifal* and the Possibility of Transcendence," "*Tapiola*: Sibelius and the God of the Wood," "*The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*," "Giacinto Scelsi: A Soundtrack for Radical Traditionalism," "God Has Become Cancer: Damien Hirst, Religion, and Death," and "The Presence of the Past: From Ancestor Worship to Hauntology."

Three essays first appeared in Troy Southgate's *Thoughts & Perspectives* volumes: "Liber III vel Jugorum and Self-Mutilation," C*rowley: Thoughts & Perspectives*, Volume 2 (London: Black Front Press, 2011); "The Immortal Death of Mishima," *Mishima: Thoughts & Perspectives*, Volume 8 (London: Black Front Press, 2012); and "Spengler: The Numinous Genesis of Culture," *Spengler: Thoughts & Perspectives*, Volume 10 (London: Black Front Press, 2012).

Two essays first appeared in *Helios*: "The Metaphysics of Death," *Helios: Journal of Metaphysical & Occult Studies*, Volume 1 (London: Black Front Press, 2011) and "The Dance Continued: Perichoresis in the Novels of Alan Garner," *Helios: Journal of Metaphysical & Occult Studies*, Volume 3 (London: Black Front Press, 2012)

Two of the short stories first appeared in *Black Gnosis*: "Ashes Hollow," *Black Gnosis* (July 2012) and "An Experiment in Relativity," *Black Gnosis* (October 2013).

"Nexus of Life: David Myatt and the Acausal" was first published in *About Myatt* (January 2009).

I would like to thank Dave and Juleigh Howard-Hobson for starting this project and Greg Johnson for completing it. I would also like to thank Kerry Bolton for writing the foreword.

Christopher Pankhurst
June 25, 2017

SPENGLER:

THE NUMINOUS GENESIS OF CULTURE

Oswald Spengler's radical contribution to the philosophy of history was to observe that different Cultures and Civilizations are discrete life forms and that they all have a certain life-expectancy. The linear progression of history, from the Stone Age to the prevailing Western liberalism, is a myth. There is no single line of history running through all of humanity. Instead, Cultures are born, they grow to maturity, they age, and they die. The springtime of one high Culture is, for Spengler, contemporaneous with the springtime of another, not with other human societies that happen to be in existence at that time. The point can be clarified by analogy with the human organism. A child alive today is contemporaneous with a child who lived in Roman times in the sense that they share the same stage of development. It is the Destiny of both children to grow to adulthood, then to descend to senility and death. This Destiny may be thwarted by disease, violence, or hunger, so that the child never matures, but it remains the Destiny of the human organism to follow such a process of growth leading to death.

Within this process of growth, Spengler draws a distinction between two separate stages: the Culture and the Civilization. The Culture is indicative of the youthful energetic phase, and transforms the symbolic imperatives of its genesis into high art and technical innovations suited to its worldview. Inevitably, these high forms begin to turn stale, and the Civilizational phase then begins to kick in. Civilization grows logically from Culture, and it represents a move to a more urban lifestyle where novelty and cosmopolitanism become sought after. Spengler identified the high point of Western Culture as being the Baroque, and the supreme artistic forms that expressed the essence of that Culture as counterpoint and oil painting. Since that peak we have moved to the democratic stage of Civilization's unfolding. Spengler is clear that this stage is dominated by the power of money. It is also associated with the rise of rationalism, identified in the Western Culture with the Age of Enlightenment. In this democratic stage, cities grow and folk traditions die out. Intellectual innovation becomes valued whilst religion disappears. The Cultural forms that surround us at the present time have decayed and degenerated due to the inner logic of organic growth and decline, so that we have only fads, fashions, and opinions masquerading as

Culture.

This form of plutocratic democracy can only exist for so long, as it soon exhausts itself in its restive search for novelty and change. Ultimately everyone becomes bored with the shallow machinations of this type of society and there begins to arise a yearning for something deeper and more meaningful, a harkening to the call of the blood:

> There wakes at last a deep yearning for all old and worthy tradition that still lingers alive. Men are tired to disgust of money-economy. They hope for salvation from somewhere or other, for some true ideal of honour and chivalry, of inward nobility, of unselfishness and duty. And now dawns the time when the form-filled powers of the blood, which the rationalism of the Megalopolis has suppressed, reawaken in the depths.[1]

This represents the beginning of the Caesarist age. This age arises from the democracies but supersedes them. It is characterized by an expansive Imperialist urge to impose its worldview on as wide a field as possible. The inner development of the Cultural life has already reached full maturity, so there will be no significant developments in that respect. The yearning for something more meaningful is satisfied by returning to earlier forms of the Culture that preceded the democratic age. These forms are no longer capable of development, but through a reengagement with them the population of the Imperial Civilization is once more able to regain a sense of nobility and the connection with the numinous that had been lost.

Spengler refers to this return to earlier forms as a “Second Religiousness.” The earlier religious impulses are now ossified, but they still provide sufficient inspiration to give impetus to the Imperium, as they are at least paradigmatically superior to the reign of money and triviality. In this particular phase we can see a plethora of new cults emerging as people gradually lose faith with the democratic money age and look for something more perennial:

> We have in the European-American world of today the occultist and theosophist fraud, the American Christian Science, the untrue Buddhism of drawing rooms, the religious arts-and-crafts business (brisker in Germany than even in England) that caters for groups and cults of Gothic or late-Classical or Taoist sentiment. Everywhere it is just a toying with myths that no one really believes, a tasting of cults that it is hoped might fill the inner void. Materialism is shallow and honest, mock-religion shallow and dishonest. But the fact that the latter is possible at all foreshadows a new

> and genuine spirit of seeking that declares itself, first quietly, but soon emphatically and openly, in the civilized waking-consciousness.[2]

When the Imperial phase has run its course then it means that this particular culture has finished. The populations living within the boundaries of the defunct empire are overrun by the barbarians and return to an ahistorical peasantry. This peasantry will subsist in a manner befitting all peasantries and will have nothing to offer to history. But within this peasantry, there will necessarily arise a need to understand and articulate the presence of the *numen*:

> He feels about him an almost indescribable *alien life* of unknown powers, and traces the origin of these effects to "numina," to the Other, inasmuch as this Other also possesses Life . . . Now it is important to observe how the consciousness of each Culture intellectually condenses its primary "numina." It imposes significant words—names—on them and thereby conjures (seizes or bounds) them. By virtue of the Name they are subject to the intellectual power of the man who possesses the Name. The pronouncement of the right name (in physics, the right concept) is an incantation.[3]

This longing for some form of higher expression, some meaningful articulation of enduring ideals, finds an outlet in the proliferation of new religiosities and cults. From this matrix of mystical yearning may grow the shoots of a new Culture that will have its own particular worldview and life-expectancy. From this perception of the *numen*, a new Cultural form can be born and, thus, the cycle of birth, growth, and death may begin again in a new vehicle.

Spengler's conception of history has drawn criticism from all sides. Many critics have questioned the element of inevitability that is inherent in Spengler's model. Theodor Adorno denied that it was historically necessary to follow the pattern that Spengler described, and he saw Spengler as an advocate for the decline he depicted. For Adorno, a key intellectual influence for the forces of the New Left, Spengler is complicit in the historical processes that he describes because he refuses to accept that historical unfolding can be altered. According to Spengler's model the lifespan of a Culture is determined by the imperative of internal logic and by its having a limited duration. For Spengler, this life-cycle cannot possibly be extended any more than the life of a human can be extended to 300 years. As he famously wrote, "optimism is cowardice."[4] Adorno refuses to accept the idea that there is an unavoidable decline that cannot be halted. Due to his abhorrence of the Caesarism of Hitler, Adorno claims that the Imperial

phase of the West is, in fact, a willed descent into barbarity and oppression. Adorno maintains that Cultures of the past died out because they were based on exploitation, and therefore lacked equilibrium.[5] With the possibility of Communism offered by Marx it was no longer necessary to succumb to the forces described by Spengler:

> In a world of brutal and oppressed life, decadence becomes the refuge of a potentially better life by renouncing its allegiance to this one and to its culture, its crudeness, and its sublimity. The powerless, who at Spengler's command, are to be thrown aside and annihilated by history, are the negative embodiment within the negativity of this culture of everything which promises, however feebly, to break the dictatorship of culture and put an end to the horror of pre-history. In their protest lies the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word. What can oppose the decline of the west is not a resurrected culture but the utopia that is silently contained in the image of its decline.[6]

Perhaps Adorno has a point. After all, the refuge of decadence has been manifested most ably throughout the former Cultures of the West by his followers, even if there is no sign yet of utopia. For Spengler, however, such diversions are all too predictable at this stage of Cultural decline. The existence of decadence, Communism, or other intellectual fads is something that might be supported or opposed, but it is not something that can affect the broader flow of history:

> Whether these doctrines are "true" or "false" is—we must reiterate and emphasize—a question without meaning for political history. The refutation of, say, Marxism belongs to the realm of academic dissertation and public debates, in which everyone is always right and his opponent always wrong . . . The power that these abstract ideals possess, however, scarcely extends in time beyond the two centuries that belong to party politics, and their end comes not from refutation but from boredom . . . Belief in program was the mark and the *glory* of our grandfathers—in our grandsons it will be a proof of provincialism. In its place is developing even now the seed of a new resigned piety, sprung from tortured conscience and spiritual hunger, whose task will be to found a new Hither-side (*Dies-seits*) that looks for secrets instead of steel-bright concepts and in the end will find them in the deeps of the "Second Religiousness."[7]

Whilst Adorno abhors Spengler's "universal structure" and denies the applicability of its prognosis to the twentieth century West, his own New Left formulation relies on the historical inevitability of Marx, and the particular model of history he promulgated—a model based on universal applicability. Adorno's critique of Spengler seems overly influenced by the particular phase of the cycle that he was living through, and is perhaps tainted with the optimistic cowardice common to utopians everywhere.

Another thinker who denies the inevitability of Spengler's model comes from the opposite end of the political spectrum to Adorno. In his introduction to Yockey's *Imperium*,[8] Willis Carto argued that the ultimate decline of the West can be avoided due to the unique technological situation available to the West at that time. Specifically, writing at the dawn of the space age, Carto suggests that space exploration could fulfil the expansive imperative of the Caesarist phase without resulting in the debilitating mixture of races that follows Imperialism. For Carto, it is this racial mixing that provides the organic cause for the decline of a Culture. All Cultures conclude with a universalist, Imperialist phase due to the inner logic of their life-form. This, Carto accepts, cannot and need not be avoided. But, with the advent of space travel, it should be possible to fulfil the inner need for Faustian exploration whilst avoiding the miscegenous downfall of all previous Cultures. Carto sees the Destiny of Western Man lying in space colonization and the creation of an interstellar Imperium.

It is an ingenious response to Spengler's pessimism, as it acknowledges the necessity of the historical processes identified by Spengler, yet seeks to align them to a transcendent goal, befitting the urge towards infinite space identified with the Faustian spirit. But no one writing in 1960 could have foreseen the limited future that space exploration was to have. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968, gave a sober prediction of intelligent, conscious computers controlling a manned flight to Saturn. This scenario was based on the best technological predictions available at the time and now looks unbelievably over-optimistic. The further we travel along the final arc of our Western Culture, the more accurate Spengler's pessimism appears.

Unlike Adorno's critique of Spengler, Carto shared many of Spengler's basic assumptions and hoped to participate in implementing the next phase of the cycle. From our perspective it seems less and less likely that there is a future for our Culture. Is there no room for hope?

There is some uncertainty about the particular phase of the cycle we are living through. In the middle part of the twentieth century it seemed clear that the Caesarist age was with us, as various European leaders superseded their

democratic systems with new regimes founded on pre-democratic ideals. The American hegemony obtaining since 1945 can either be seen as the cessation of the Caesarist imperative, or its deeper fulfilment in the global spread of Western ideas. The latter interpretation, if it is correct, would undermine Spengler's model as it would demonstrate the achievement of Imperium through the power of money, rather than through the transcendence of money values. Certainly, Yockey saw 1945 as representing the beginning of pseudomorphosis, a sort of sickness causing the Cultural organism to fall out of sync with its Destiny. For Yockey, this sickness was due to the Culture distortion imposed by the Jewish elites in America who have taken over that country and now rule it for their own ends. Spengler had described historical pseudomorphosis as the imposition of an older Cultural form on a younger, and more vital, form.

If we accept that the global world order gathering pace under the (distorted) American banner is, in fact, a pseudomorphic distortion of the Destiny of the West, then we are faced with two possible scenarios: the first is that the Caesarist phase has been thwarted, in which case the Culture is already dead, and there can be no possibility of Cultural renewal; the second is that the Global World Order is just an extension of the democratic money period, that the Caesarism of the 1930s was premature, and that we are yet to begin the authentic Imperium phase of our Culture. Thus, we are either entering an ahistorical descent into peasantry or we are awaiting an Imperial renewal of earlier forms.

The interesting thing is that, in either of those scenarios, we are living at a time in which we would expect to see the beginnings of new yearnings towards the numinous. Before considering the possibility of such new numinous forms emerging, it will be helpful to sketch a brief outline of the arc of development of Western artistic Culture. The intention is simply to identify the internal logic of the West's decline.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) played an important role in the development of Western music. At this ecclesiastical conference the question of counterpoint in music was discussed. The issue was controversial because it was felt by some that counterpoint was being deployed for mere ornamentation, for entertainment value. Whereas plainsong allowed for complete clarity in singing lines of scripture, counterpoint tended (so the argument went) to obscure the text by employing elaborate musical techniques that demanded adulation in their own right. The music was meant to be a mere vehicle for the praise of God. Legend has it that the composer Palestrina persuaded the Council of the merits of counterpoint by composing a mass which utilized that technique so beautifully that they accepted its application as an art suitable for worship.

Counterpoint became the emblem of the Culture of the West. For Spengler, the

fundamental symbolic formulation for the West's mode of apprehension was the yearning for infinite space. Counterpoint was the perfect way of expressing this yearning: "The symbolism of counterpoint belongs to extension and through polyphony signifies infinite space."[9] This characteristically Western form of expression developed into the form of the sonata, and its voice became that of the stringed instruments:

> The theme of the fugue "is," that of the new sonata-movement "becomes," and the issue of its working out is in the one case a picture, in the other a drama. Instead of a series of pictures we get a cyclic succession, and the real source of this tone-language was in the possibilities, realized at last, of our deepest and most intimate kind of music—the music of the strings. Certain it is that the violin is the noblest of all instruments that the Faustian soul has imagined and trained for the expression of its last secrets, and certain it is, too, that it is in string quartets and violin sonatas that it has experienced its most transcendent and most holy moments of full illumination. Here, *in chamber-music, Western art as a whole reaches its highest point*.[10]

What has happened at this point in the Culture's development is that music has become a thing in itself. It is no longer used as an appendage to other art or religious forms. It becomes instead the foremost form of expression in its own right. Whereas the Classical Culture's primary symbol was the body, representing a conceptual worldview based on a feeling for solidity and best expressed through sculpture, the Western primary symbol is infinite space, the furthest horizon, and it finds its supreme expression through the polyphonic music of the strings.

The creation of the sonata form was also accompanied by further developments in Western Culture. In particular, the novel reached a certain peak of formulation at around the same time as the sonata, and both forms share structural similarities. In a formulaic sonata, the first subject is presented in the home key which then bridges to a second subject in a different key. The two subjects are developed before both are finally resolved by returning to the initial home key. This schema of unity disrupted by conflict which is then resolved into further unity underlies most classic novels, and could be said to represent the form of the novel. In fact, it is a structure underlying the hero myths and sagas that accompanied the birth of the Culture, so it can be seen that, in this sense, the sonata and the novel are the ultimate crystallization of the underlying myths of our Culture.

With the achievement of these forms, there is nowhere else for Culture to go. From its inception, the Culture has been developing the forms of its expression apposite to its specific apprehension of the numinous. From the earliest sagas, through the medieval morality plays and mummer plays, to the grandiloquence of Elizabethan theatre, and finally to the privately consumed, and individually wrought form of the novel, the Culture has travelled from a shared experience of numinous heroism to the private contemplation of personal psychology. A similar trajectory is followed in the field of music: from the heroic Anglo-Saxon poetry (which would have been accompanied by the *heorp*, a stringed instrument), through the ritualized church music of medieval times, to the polyphony and chamber music of the eighteenth century, and then on to the absolute music that sought expression purely in its own terms, concluding with the sterile experimentalism of the twentieth century.

For Yockey, and others, the artistic degradations of the twentieth century were a consequence of Culture distortion. In particular, Yockey referred to the revolution of 1933, which saw the full augmentation of Jewish power under Roosevelt in America. Following Yockey's model, the Jewish takeover of power in America led to the hegemony of Jewish influence in the arts and created the possibility for the spread of those ideas peculiar to the Jewish mindset: the atonality of Schoenberg, the development of minimalism by Reich, and so on. It is undoubtedly certain that the rise of Jewish power in America has led to an exacerbation of artistic forces that are antithetical to the ethos of the West, but it is still the case that the Culture of the West was already set on course for much of the individualism and triviality that is nowadays often dismissed as "Jewish." The real problem with the idea of Culture distortion is that it tends to downplay the importance of the real arc of Western Cultural development by fixating on those elements that are foreign to it, and thereby failing to acknowledge that Western Culture was already declining without the influence of Jews. The danger here is that, whilst playing *cherchez le juif*, we tend to hark back to older and more fulfilling Cultural forms, but forms whose force has already been spent. In doing so, we risk replacing one species of pseudomorphosis with another. This is so because the tendency is to return to the shells of previous Cultural forms, shells no longer animated by the numinous force that made them powerful to begin with.

We have already seen that the genesis of Culture, as well as the second religiousness, is animated by the perception of the numinous. The *numen* is the presiding god of a particular place. The word is related to the Latin *nuere*, nod, and to the Greek *neuein*, incline the head, indicating an assent or command. Thus, the word indicates the effects of the power of the deity. If we are to begin

to look for signs of incipient Cultural stirrings beneath the surface of what passes for artistic endeavor nowadays, it will be necessary to seek out those currents that transmit something of the numinous, or that pay worship to the presiding deity. In looking for such signs it is important to remember that the numinous is concerned with the awe-inspiring, and as such it is unrelated to forms which might seek to pay lip service to existing religious structures. Artistic forms capable of embodying the numinous will often be shocking and unexpected. Many readers will disagree with the observations concerning numinous Culture that follow, and will dismiss them out of hand. But it is to be hoped that the presiding deity of our Culture is still able to transcend the expectations of conservative taste.

In the following I will firstly be contrasting seemingly similar outward forms and noting the essential difference between them; secondly, comparing apparently distinct forms and noting the essential similarity; and thirdly, noting how a particular work illustrates the difference between the Second Religiousness and the birthing of an entirely new Culture. The purpose of these contrasts is to locate the centrality of the numinous in the genesis of Culture.

To begin at the opposite end of the artistic spectrum from the numinous, the *Sensation* exhibition, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1997, showcased the collection of Charles Saatchi and offered a useful index of everything that is wrong with contemporary art. *Sensation* was primarily a showcase for the more conceptually-minded artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. But it lodged itself in the public consciousness due to the inclusion of a work of acrylic on canvas by the painter Marcus Harvey. *Myra* was a portrait of the so-called moors murderer, Myra Hindley, based on the legendary police photograph taken after her arrest. This large painting employs a sort of pointillist style and gains its notoriety due to the fact that the paint is applied using the handprints of small children. One viewer was moved to smuggle in and throw paint onto the picture when he viewed it. Despite the assertions of Norman Rosenthal in the exhibition catalogue that the purpose of art is “to conquer territory that hitherto has been taboo,”[11] *Sensation* neither broke taboos nor conquered new territory; nor did it have a moment’s thought for the numinous. In fact, after the vandalism of the *Myra* painting, the area around the picture was roped off and a security guard was employed to stand protectively next to it. This only served to emphasize the feeling that this sort of art aggrandizes its own sense of importance to such an extent that we are meant to worship *it*, rather than allowing it to be a bridge to a true object of reverence.

The esoteric precursor to *Myra* can be found in the strange quasi-manifesto of

COUM Transmissions, “Annihilating Reality,” written by Genesis P-Orridge and Peter Christopherson. This document is concerned with questioning, not so much what constitutes art, but whether art should be seen to transcend legal and social taboos, and contextual legitimacy. In particular, they contrast certain avant-garde artistic provocations with criminal, or socially unacceptable, activities, and ask where the sanctification of a work as “art” comes from. They suggest that many artists share similar impulses with criminals, and indeed similarity of forms of expression with them in certain cases. The piece uses a large number of quotations and short, often disconnected, paragraphs titled either “hearsay” or “heresy,” as well as a large number of illustrations to demonstrate its point. But the most controversial part, which led to media condemnation,[12] concerns the idea that the photographs taken by Ian Brady on Saddleworth Moor, which have a secret meaning for him due to his knowledge of the burial sites of his child victims, might be considered a form of performance art:

> Hearsay: Ian Brady and Myra Hindley photographed landscapes on the Moors in England where they had buried children after sexually assaulting and killing them. Landscapes that only have meaning when perceived through their eyes. Art is perception of the moment. Action. Conscious. Brady as conceptual performer?[13]

The example of the moors murderers is a distasteful one, to say the very least, but it was no doubt intended to make the point *in extremis*. The more sober question the article poses concerns what the essential element of artistic creation is, and whether it requires prior or retrospective endorsement by some establishment to gain legitimacy.

Whilst one of the purposes of “Annihilating Reality” was to puncture the pretensions of the art establishment, it nonetheless made some important points. The manifesto states, “Performance art is probably the Shaman, Mystic, Lunatic, Buddha, visionary of contemporary times, in a post-religious era a crucial and responsible function best kept away from dealers who are the Pardoners of our culture.”[14]

It is this realization that distinguishes the article from mere provocation. The common element that P-Orridge and Christopherson move towards in “Annihilating Reality” is a perception of the present moment as a consciously lived experience. Whilst art can create this heightened sense of awareness, so can crime. By identifying the distinguishing merit of art with this heightened, mystic awareness, P-Orridge and Christopherson set the ground for their

subsequent experiments with Thee Temple Ov Psychick Youth, Chaos Magick, and other projects. The important thing to note is that, from an early stage, they were perceiving their own art projects as being set within a context of mystical consciousness; a nebulous idea, perhaps, but indicative of an experimental praxis allied to the numinous.

Despite the apparent similarity of using the shocking subject matter of the moors murderers, Harvey's painting is firmly located within the context of the art establishment and employs notoriety in order to extend its meaning as art; whilst the praxis suggested in "Annihilating Reality" seeks to subvert the very notion of "art" as a category by noting its arbitrariness, and by isolating the point of numinous apprehension as the nexus of its operation.

Within the field of music there is often no synergy whatsoever between different genres, and this is particularly the case when considering "classical" music in relation to "popular" music. As discussed earlier, the Western musical tradition, according to Spengler, reached its apex with the sonata form. Its subsequent development, particularly through the twentieth century, is problematic. The twelve-tone system of Schoenberg; the serialism of Boulez, the elaborate experimentalism of Stockhausen—all, to different degrees, speak of either the decline of the tradition or its distortion; probably both. Nonetheless, adherents of the Western tradition seek to protect and segregate classical music from the degenerate forces of more popular forms; this, despite the evident degeneracy of the classical form itself. If we are to seek the essential spirit that lies within music, we will begin to transcend the barrier between "classical" and "popular" that has now become obsolete.

Giacinto Scelsi was a reclusive Italian composer who was initially interested in the twelve-tone system and other early twentieth century experimentations. Following a personal crisis, he changed direction and became concerned with exploring the musical possibilities inherent in a single note, and he saw this project as being a deeply mystical one. This dates from his 1959 composition, *Four Pieces on a Single Note*. What he sought to do in this work, and subsequently, was to open out the tonal and timbral textures of a single note and to explore the range of sonic possibilities that could be found within it. This compositional praxis bears similarity with the chanting of Tibetan monks, who elaborate on a single tone with simple instrumentation.

In works such as *Anahit* and *Uaxuctum* (subtitled *The Legend of the Maya City, Destroyed by Themselves for Religious Reasons*), Scelsi's music achieved a simultaneous sense of accessibility and arcane depth. The graceful majesty of the sustained tones is underpinned by being surrounded by a restive instrumental accompaniment. It is music that resembles sunlight on a still pond; a singular

impression formed by a constantly fluctuating surface. It is also music that is somewhat terrifying, evoking a sense of cosmic space and emptiness. In this sense it is similar to Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, which also provokes a sense of awe. Scelsi's music avoids the alienating and unappealing elements of atonality, and instead brings together a rich and unique tonal sensibility within a framework guided by his interest in mysticism.

Scelsi's 1969 piece, *Konx Om Pax*, is in three movements and is subtitled *Three Aspects of Sound: as the First Motion of the Immutable; as Creative Force; as the Syllable Om (the Buddhists' Sacred Syllable)*. In the third movement, the orchestra is joined by the chorus repeating the sacred syllable "Om." Like much of Scelsi's *oeuvre*, the music is superficially repetitive, but the repetition is never straightforward; the work develops and progresses, but never strays from its obsessively focused theme. The title *Konx Om Pax* refers to the word "peace" in three different languages, and is also the title of a book by the occultist Aleister Crowley. *Knox Om Pax* provides a link between Scelsi and some of the post-punk experimentalism that took place a decade or so after its composition.

The album *Nature Unveiled* by Current 93 contains two long tracks that bear a great deal of similarity with Scelsi's music. "Ach Golgotha (Maldoror is Dead)" is partly based on a looped tape recording of Crowley chanting "Om," and in this it is directly linked to Scelsi's *Konx Om Pax*. But far deeper than this, it is apparent that the sonic landscape presented in "Ach Golgotha (Maldoror is Dead)" is attempting to express a certain state of mind, or being, that segues entirely with what Scelsi was trying to achieve. Certainly, "Ach Golgotha (Maldoror is Dead)" is possibly one of the most terrifying sound recordings ever made. It is somewhat repetitive, but, again, it has nothing in common with serialism. In fact, a distinguishing feature of both Scelsi's and Current 93's music is that it is clearly articulated with a great deal of emotional resonance; it has nothing in common with the arid intellectual elitism of atonality. Listening to both *Konx Om Pax* and "Ach Golgotha (Maldoror is Dead)," one perceives that both pieces are attempting to manifest a sense of the numinously awe-inspiring character of sacred sound. That they both turned to prior religious forms in order to do so is not really the point. Both pieces transcend their source material and point towards new musical forms.

In literature, some of the plays of Peter Shaffer deal with a renewed sense of numinous apprehension, most notably *Equus* which, incidentally, was the inspiration for the Current 93 song "Hooves." In this play a young boy, Alan Strang, is referred to a psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, after he has blinded six horses with a metal spike. The play depicts the psychiatrist's efforts to get to the

underlying motive beneath Alan's gruesome act. As we learn more about Alan's background, it becomes apparent that, through a complex mix of Christian guilt and sexual immaturity, he has come to create a personal religion for himself. The root cause of this can be traced back to when he was a young child and was once taken for a ride on a horse by a stranger on a beach. For a few moments he was able to experience genuine freedom and exhilaration, and an escape from the repressive atmosphere created by his parents. Dysart learns that when Alan first saw this horse, he was able to converse with it in his mind. The horse is called Equus, and he lives in all horses; he is the divinity of horses. From this moment on, Alan carries out rites and observances to Equus in secret, culminating in the psychotic blinding of the six horses in an act of defiance of divine omniscience.

As Dysart learns more about Alan, he comes to understand that Alan has experienced a numinous relationship with his new god, albeit manifested through psychosis. Dysart becomes jealous of his patient as he realizes that his own life is a suburban charade, lacking in the conviction that Alan's instinctive worship is able to manifest spontaneously:

> I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos—and outside my window he is trying to *become one*, in a Hampshire field! . . . I watch that woman [Dysart's wife] knitting, night after night—a woman I haven't *kissed* in six years—and he stands in the dark for an hour, sucking the sweat off his God's hairy cheek! (Pause) Then in the morning, I put away my books on the cultural shelf, close up the kodachrome snaps of Mount Olympus, touch my reproduction statue of Dionysus for luck—and go off to hospital to treat him for insanity. Do you see?[15]

Dysart becomes troubled by the idea of trying to cure Alan because he recognizes that to do so will rob Alan of his worship, as well as his psychosis. At the play's conclusion, Dysart delivers a valedictory soliloquy to Alan:

> Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created. You won't gallop any more, Alan. Horses will be quite safe. You'll save your money every week, till you can change that scooter for a car, you'll slip round to the Betting Shop and put the odd fifty P on the gee-gees, quite forgetting that they were ever anything more to you than bearers of little profits or little losses. You will, however, be without pain. More or less completely without pain.[16]

Equus depicts the distance that lies between the adherents of the Second

Religiousness and the creators of new, numinous Cultures. Dysart is grasping at long-since-spent forms, whilst Alan is birthing new forms in blood. Even Dysart's name points to his location in the late Civilizational phase (Dysart = Dys-art, i.e., bad art). Alan's personal religion is doomed to be cured out of existence, but he has nonetheless lived for a time with the numinous, in all its beauty and horror.

If we accept that Spengler was right; if we accept that the future holds for us only decline, whether in the end of our Civilization or in the last hurrah of the Second Religiousness of the Imperium; then we still need not despair. Optimism is cowardice, but only if it hopes for the renewal of what has passed. New Cultures are birthed in the apprehension of the numinous; they are the effects of the surfeit of power of particular gods. If we wish to aggrandize ourselves and assume that we have a stake in Culture, that we can influence Culture in some way, then we can only do so by seeking out expressions of the numinous in Culture, and by encouraging their earthing. In this way we are able to hear the music of our god. An Imperium, or a new Culture, may not occur in our lifetimes; this looks increasingly likely. But if we pay attention to the numinous and revere it in all its forms, then we are already placing ourselves out of time, beyond the limitations of the vulgar money age, and participating in the seeding of a new, numinous Culture.

Music of the Future

The interregnum is a time of ultimate possibility. Poised as we are between the end of the old European culture and the possibility of a new, reborn, European culture it is useful to give some thought to the direction that our new culture should take.

That the old culture has died will be obvious to anyone who has any sensitivity to such matters whatsoever. The great musical tradition that reached a high watermark with Bach, and that subsequently sought expression through the individual genius of Beethoven and Schubert, had its funeral song in Strauss' *Metamorphosen*. This intensely sad work for strings evoked the destroyed greatness of the German opera houses where Strauss had had so many successes, and which, like the musical tradition itself, were lying in ruins in the 1940s. Atonality, serialism, jazz, all strode arrogantly and somewhat vengefully over the grave of the Western tradition. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, ugliness has become so ubiquitous that we are in danger of forgetting what makes beauty worthwhile in the first place.

The European musical tradition was so great, so intensely beautiful, that some supporters of European culture wish to revive the corpse and have it, like some deranged zombie, replay its greatest hits. We must be clear in recognizing that however sublime the music of our past culture was, it now belongs to a culture that has died. However sad it might be to think that this great tradition will never sing again, we must not be unduly sentimental about such matters. Everything dies, and our old European culture is no exception.

This does not mean that we should fail to acknowledge the greatness of our tradition. On the contrary, we should honor our deceased ancestors and learn from them. What we cannot afford to do is engage in useless talk of cultural revival. There will be no revival of the old European musical tradition. An unhealthy insistence on the superiority of the dead culture over all present forms results in a sort of cultural necrophilia, and tends towards the sort of cultural enervation that is explicitly being resisted. In short, it is futile.

There was no single genesis for our musical culture, but the Council of Trent is sometimes taken as being the midwife of counterpoint. At this ecclesiastical conference, the question of counterpoint in music was discussed. The issue was controversial because it was felt by some that counterpoint was being deployed for mere ornamentation, for entertainment value. Whereas plainsong allowed for

complete clarity in singing lines of scripture, counterpoint tended (so the argument went) to obscure the text by employing elaborate musical techniques that demanded adulation in their own right. The music was meant to be a mere vehicle for the praise of God. Legend has it that the composer Palestrina persuaded the Council of the merits of counterpoint by composing a mass which utilized that technique so beautifully that they accepted its application as an art suitable for worship.

In any case, counterpoint, or polyphony, came to be the quintessentially European mode of expression in musical form. Whilst the outcome of the Council enabled the genius of Bach to emerge in all its glory, it also, inadvertently and circuitously, led to the present degeneration of music. Why? Because the Council's decision allowed for the possibility that musical composition could exist for its own sake, distinct from the pursuit of the numinous.

The purpose of all Traditional art is to find expression for numinous apprehension, to recreate the ineffable through a symbolic simulacrum. As soon as this imperative departs from the creative function, the appetites and desires of man become a valid subject for artistic expression. The end result of such a process, inevitably, is the sort of debased egotism masquerading as art that we see everywhere in the West today.

This decline from a numinous to a personal art can be mapped in many ways but, for the twentieth century, the emergence of numerous avant-garde fads in classical music is a good example. For most people, atonality, serialism, and so on appear to be quite soulless. This common sense view contains a great deal of truth, as these musical forms attempt to elevate a sense of novelty and intellectual cleverness to a position that demands worship. Here, it might be wise to bear in mind the origin of the word "culture" in the Latin *colere*. *Colere* meant "inhabit," whence the word "colony" also derived. "Cultivation," as in land husbandry, is another word derived from *colere*, which then takes on the additional sense of respect and worship, whence "cult" develops. This etymological exercise is necessary because it alerts us to the fact that culture was traditionally concerned with respect for one's land. From this position, the importance of folk art becomes clear. From this folk art, it is possible to develop a higher culture which is concerned with worshipping the numinous, but it is essential to note that this form of numinous worship grows from a rooted, folkish community. Within this model of Traditional art, there is no place whatsoever for "clever," or "novel," art. To worship one's own sense of smugness is to debase what it means to be human.

Defenders of European culture can, as a result of its decline, appear to be

harking back to glory days that never really existed (at least not in the way that we imagine them now). This cultural conservatism can never really succeed because culture, even whilst it maintains fidelity to the perennial tradition, must be a dynamic life-form. The spirit that creates great and lasting art is the same spirit that is found on battlefields, or in the selfless pain of a mother in labor, not in the spirit of a museum curator. This spirit (if we accept that the numinous finds expression through man rather than the other way around) will seek articulation in vital, living forms, and will not necessarily respect our notions of taste.

Listen to "Das Wirtshaus" from Schubert's *Winterreise*, and then to "Whilst the Night Rejoices Profound and Still" from Current 93's *Soft Black Stars*. I would suggest that the tone of aching sadness that pervades both songs springs from the same source. To suggest that the one is a classic of the Western canon whilst condemning the other to a status of *Entartete Musik* betrays an attitude that is blinded by the self-righteousness of anti-modernity. Only the most dedicated taxonomist of European art would be able to discern any meaningful distinction between the two pieces of music. In fact, given that Schubert was creating the template for the modern pop song (short, lyrical, the foregrounding of emotion, etc.) and that David Tibet is actively seeking a deeper, more spiritual form of expression, one could make the case that Tibet is the greater exemplar of European culture. Heresy to aficionados, no doubt, but what other than snobbery supports their view?

The perspective of Oswald Spengler will be germane here. In *Decline of the West*, he compares the Christian *Dies Irae* with the heathen *Völuspá* and finds "the same adamantine will to overcome and break all resistances of the visible."[17] In our European art, there is found time and time again the same Faustian spirit manifesting in various superficially distinct forms. Like Odin, this spirit wanders restlessly, donning and discarding masks as it requires. The important task for us is to discern the true essence within the form. At the present time of our culture, this spirit is not to be found in the world of classical music.

Through the twentieth century, it is true, there have been some important, even numinous, pieces of music created in the classical music tradition. One thinks of Ligeti, Messiaen, Pärt, and so on. But these works tend increasingly to be created by individual eccentric geniuses who are able to create art despite the culture, and not because of it. The European musical tradition used to be synonymous with church music, and as such it was wedded firmly to the aim of presencing the numinous. This was a project supported and financed by the

power brokers of European societies. The art arose as an organic imperative, articulating the soul of the West at a higher level. Today there is not a single European culture in existence anywhere in the world. Consequently, the sort of art that arose from past cultures of the West is no longer possible. There is nowhere a higher European culture based on smaller homogeneous local communities, bound together through shared sacred observances. Without the existence of such a culture, there can be no continuation of the artistic current of the past.

Analogous to the development and decline of the musical tradition is the decline of our literary tradition. By the time of Shakespeare, English literature was still based on certain authentic traditional forms (*Hamlet*, after all, was originally a Germanic saga), but the decadence of a sophisticated cosmopolitanism was already in evidence. When Macbeth laments that, “The multitudinous seas incarnadine / Making the green one red,” the superfluous second line is simply an elegant echo of the foreign neologisms in the first. This voracious capacity for stealing foreign words is one of the reasons for Shakespeare’s eloquence, but it also meant that poetry was already appealing to the aesthetic desires of man rather than serving the greater imperative of sanctifying his higher qualities. The earlier literary tradition, as evidenced in the Eddas, the Sagas, and the battle poems, sought to make the deeds of man sacred by immortalizing the heroic, and by sanctifying its emulation.

By the time of Wordsworth, the decline of literature was such a concern that he and Coleridge attempted to revivify it by presenting a new form of ballad poetry. They attempted to discard the ornate and decorous rhetoric that had become so popular in poetry, and return to a simpler, quasi-peasant tradition. William Blake’s more mystically inclined *Songs of Innocence and Experience* also attempted a simpler, pared-down use of English. A similar rearguard action was carried out in the twentieth century when T. S. Eliot attempted to reinvent literature through the deployment of different registers of speech and the juxtaposition of distinct perspectives. The circus of postmodernity was the reward for his efforts.

The phase of the cultural cycle we have now reached is perhaps the most exciting one of all, as it contains the greatest possibility. The moribund power structures of the West are falling down around our ears. The Faustian spirit of the West will not look to such soulless structures for its manifestation, but instead to new, emerging forms. These may appear in the highfalutin world of esoteric art or, equally, in much more popular forms. What is important is not the pretense of snobbery, based on supposed “refined” taste, but the inner essence of the art form regardless of its means of appearance. Coomaraswamy makes the point

well:

> The distinction is not nearly so much of aristocratic from peasant culture as it is one of aristocratic and peasant from bourgeoisie and proletarian cultures . . . A traditional must not be confused with an academic or merely fashionable art; tradition is not a mere stylistic fixation, nor merely a matter of general suffrage. A traditional art has fixed ends and ascertained means of operation, has been transmitted in papillary succession from an immemorial past, and retains its values even when, as at the present day, it has gone quite out of fashion. Hieratic and folk arts are both alike traditional . . . An academic art, on the other hand, however great its prestige, and however fashionable it may be, can very well be and is usually of an anti-traditional, personal, profane, and sentimental sort.[18]

As Coomaraswamy points out so often in his work, it is frequently the lower classes which are best able to preserve Traditional teaching because they are less susceptible to the charms of sophisticated cosmopolitanism than their more wealthy compatriots. This view is quite counter-intuitive to many who perceive the most educated classes as being the best exemplars of culture. It is true that when a culture is at its highest point of achievement its fruits will come from the elite. But when that elite supports a distorted culture, expressed through materialism, hedonism, and egotism, we should look to other, perhaps despised, forms of artistic expression to find something that is more authentically European.

If the wheel is to turn once more and European culture is to experience a new phase of creation, it will only be possible with the creation of new types of society that eschew the materialistic, globalist, authoritarian assumptions of the present time. Such societies must be based on smaller, more rural, more self-sufficient, communities. The vacuity of modern culture is a consequence of enervating modes of living which promote abstract ideologies and virtual relationships, all at the behest of capital and the expense of the numinous. Traditional art will only arise (apart from occasional individuals of genius) from smaller communities based on more personal social relationships, and a more authentic understanding of the land and the passing of the seasons. Only in such circumstances may a new (and yet immemorably old) numinous understanding arise.

At the present time, we should be looking for the formation of *Männerbund*-type groupings that will provide the necessary warrior ethos for the formation of such communities. These groupings will be likely to form in rather rebellious

subcultural cliques, one of which we have already seen in the Black Metal scene. The Norwegian Black Metal scene of the 1990s has been shown, in a booklet by the Austrian writer Kadmon,[19] to be an unconscious remanifestation of the Oskorei, the Wild Hunt. In Norway, in pagan times, cultic groups of young, unmarried men would ride horses wildly around their area at the time of the Winter Solstice. In common with their latter-day Black Metal counterparts, they would dress as corpses, commit acts of sacred arson, and make a cacophonous noise. The relevance of this to the continuation of the European musical tradition will be lost on many, but the key element is that the Black Metal musicians were restoring a natural balance to what had become unhealthy. The earlier *Männerbund*-type cultic groups were not simply causing chaos for the sake of it. They had a sacred function, and by operating at the Winter Solstice they were the "dark" counterpoint to the "light" fertility celebrations of the Spring. Both are necessary for balance to be maintained.

I am not attempting to suggest that Black Metal is necessarily the sort of music to which everybody should listen, although some albums, such as *Det Som Engang Var* by Burzum, have an undeniable austere beauty. I am instead concerned with recognizing the manifestation of the numinous Faustian soul of the West, however it is masked. More prosaically, we will only be moved by what speaks to us effectively. It is no doubt true that the classical tradition represents the most eloquent expression of European music, but the most eloquent voice is not always the one that will move us most urgently.

In the absence of a functioning European culture, the authentic manifestations of the spirit of the West will arise at the margins of culture. Whether in Black Metal, folk music, neo-folk, or something yet to emerge, the key point is whether these subcultural groups maintain a connection to the numinous essence of the European spirit. The fact that there is so much heathen, pagan, and occult imagery in the aforementioned genres is a cause for celebration, as it demonstrates a concern with expressing an authentically European and numinous worldview.

Whether the new musical formulations expressed through Black Metal, neo-folk, or whatever else are "better" or "worse" than the classics of the European canon that preceded them is a somewhat moot point. Perhaps these modern forms really are less accomplished and less musically articulate than the preceding forms. But the point is that, in the absence of contemporary, authentically European, forms of expression in the classical idiom, the existence of such popular expressions of the Faustian spirit should be celebrated unreservedly. However juvenile they may be as musical genres (and here I use

the word “juvenile” only as a point of musical comparison with the classical tradition—these musicians are not puerile), it remains true that a great oak will only grow from an acorn, not from a fallen branch.

Since the Renaissance, the god Orpheus has been an archetypal figure for European music. His was the power to charm nature into submission through his art, a very Faustian attribute. When Orpheus’ wife, Eurydice, died, Orpheus travelled to the underworld, and through the majesty of his music persuaded Hades and Persephone to allow Eurydice to accompany him home, thus defying death. The gods of the underworld made one condition: that Orpheus would not look back. As Orpheus emerged from the underworld, he was overcome with longing for Eurydice and turned to look back at her, but she had not yet followed him out to Earth, so she was dragged back down, this time never to return. This story is a salutary one for all those concerned with the future of European culture.

Parsifal & the Possibility of Transcendence

In 1878 Nietzsche sent a copy of his book *Human, All Too Human* to Richard Wagner. At the same time, Wagner sent Nietzsche a copy of the libretto for his opera *Parsifal*. Nietzsche was later to write that when he received this text, "I felt as if I heard an ominous sound—as if two swords had crossed."[20] Nietzsche had immediately realized that the two men had drifted irreparably apart. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche had made a decisive move against the Western metaphysical tradition, and he saw the text of *Parsifal* as being deeply embedded within that tradition. By the time of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, Wagner had become immersed in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and he was able to infuse those works with a thoroughly Schopenhauerian atmosphere. In particular, *Parsifal* was the culmination of Wagner's life's work, and with its theme of redemption through compassion, it fully articulated his mature Schopenhauerian beliefs. Largely because of Wagner's lucid expression of this theme, the opera was to become a persistent *bête noir* of Nietzsche. Although he had previously enjoyed a deep and rewarding friendship with Wagner, Nietzsche came to view *Parsifal* as the epitome of everything that was wrong with culture, and he continued to gnaw away irritably at it, like a dog with an old bone, for the rest of his sane life. At the heart of Nietzsche's criticism of *Parsifal* is his rejection of the possibility of redemption from this world, and of transcendence to a higher realm. With Schopenhauer, the idea of transcendence had reached its most highly developed articulation within the Western philosophical tradition; after Nietzsche's attack on *Parsifal*, it became impossible to uncritically accept the possibility of transcendence at all.

With the influence of Schopenhauer, the lucid artistry of Wagner, and the devastating critique by Nietzsche, *Parsifal* can be seen as a nexus for some of the most important tributaries of nineteenth century philosophical thought.

Schopenhauer's philosophy begins with the observation that everything that exists can only be known to us through our senses, through perception. Therefore, we have no direct access to an objective, independently existing world. For us the world exists only as representation. This applies not only to objects but also to all of the natural laws that connect objects with each other, such as magnetism and gravitation. Space and time are also not independently

existing qualities, but are dependent on the perceptual faculties of an observing subject, and so are expressions of the world as representation. The ways in which things interact in space and time are determinable by laws, but these laws themselves all belong to that same plane of phenomenal existence. In other words, even causality belongs to the world of representation. Schopenhauer was a great admirer of many of the mystical works of ancient India such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, and he saw an affinity between them and his own philosophical work. The ancient teaching that this world is Maya, or illusion, is often cited by Schopenhauer as being parallel with his own observation that the world is representation.

So, in the world of representation, objects and forces interact with each other in causally determined ways. The individual observer is himself a part of this interplay, so he is also part of the world of representation; he is one object of representation amongst many, many others. If there was nothing else to this explanation, then the individual would find himself to be a mere observer of a world of interacting objects, and his actions would simply occur according to deterministic laws. But this is not at all how reality appears to us. We feel that we are agents in the world, that we have a self-determined power of volition. So, whilst we recognize ourselves as existing in the world of representation as an object, we also feel that there is something more to it than this. It seems that the world of representation is insufficient to explain the totality of the world that we experience, that there must be some additional, hidden quality to the world anterior to the world of representation. Otherwise the world would consist merely of "empty phantoms."[21] For Schopenhauer, this additional something is will.

An individual experiences his own sense of will as the volitional manifestation of particular actions of his body. These do not simply appear to him as occurring due to some causal situation, instead they feel deliberately willed. When he stands up and walks to the window he feels that he is acting in the world, not merely observing it. This sense of volition is precisely the action of the will. As soon as the action is performed, it is perceived through the senses and becomes a part of the world of representation. But the initial volition does not arise from the world of representation but from the world of will. So, the individual exists both as will and representation.

From this, Schopenhauer extrapolates that everything that exists in the world as representation also has another, and unconditional, aspect as will. In fact, Schopenhauer's assertion that everything that exists as representation also consists of will is not merely drawn analogically from the experience of a

particular individual but is shown to be a necessary state of existence. This is so because representation alone cannot explain the existence of anything. It is possible to describe the actions of all sorts of phenomena and to explain how they interact with each other, but we are left with a puzzle regarding the inner nature of these phenomena. However, we choose to measure or describe objects or forces, we are measuring and describing only that part of them that manifests itself as phenomenon, that is, the aspect of the object manifested as representation. This form can express extension in space or duration in time, but its inner quality, its essence, is hidden from us. This hidden essence is "an insoluble residuum"[22] and cannot be discerned by investigating the form of phenomena, but only by recognizing the presence of will as the hidden essence within all forms. Once we are able to understand that it is will that manifests itself in representation, that it is the hidden essence behind all perceptible forms, then we can see that it is: "the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant, indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet to the North Pole, the force whose shock he encounters from the contact of metals of different kinds, the force that appears in the elective affinities of matter as repulsion and attraction, separation and union, and finally even gravitation, which acts so powerfully in all matter, pulling the stone to the earth and the earth to the sun; all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature."[23]

Thus, behind all the apparent plurality of diverse phenomena there is a higher unity which is the will. The world of representation is secondary to this because it is dependent for its existence on a knowing subject and so is conditional. The world of will is unconditional; it exists prior to every manifestation. Thus, the world of will, which expresses a unity between all things which appear distinct, is fundamentally real in a way that the world of representation is not. The world of representation, of all perceptible phenomena, is shrouded in the illusory veil of Maya. When we lift the veil, we are left with will.

So human beings, like all other things in the universe, have a "twofold existence,"[24] consisting of both will and representation. In impersonal forces such as gravitation and magnetism, the will is not especially developed; it acts blindly and in completely uniform ways. In living things such as plants, it has a higher degree of organizational development and expresses itself through life-cycles, growing to seed before dying off. In animals it is more highly developed still, so that each individual creature fights for its own food, territory, and mates, and so on. In humans the will has developed to its highest form and has the greatest degree of self-awareness, to the extent that, uniquely, it is able to deny

itself. In humans, then, we see the greatest degree of self-awareness. But the will manifested in a world of representation finds itself refracted into untold billions of distinct, causal phenomena. In the midst of this illusory fragmentation, the will seeks satiety and fulfilment. But this relentless desire, according to Schopenhauer, can never reach an end.

Because humans live in the world of representation, we are only aware of the illusory existence of diverse, discrete individuals. Each of us thinks that he exists as a single and separate entity forever cut off from the inner processes of other individuals. For Schopenhauer, this is pure delusion. The reality is that we are all expressions in causal reality of a deeper and more fundamental unity. The will itself is singular and indivisible, and it establishes itself in a bewildering multiplicity of varied forms. So, the perception of a world of distinct and separated objects and forces is illusory and, to this extent, is an error. The hidden truth is that of a single, unified will outside of space and time. But this reality is hidden from us because it does not exist in the perceptual world. So the illusion of a world of many distinct individual objects and forces compels us to constantly strive to achieve union with those things that are separate from us, and which we experience as a lack. The desire for sexual intercourse, hunger for food, and the striving for wealth are all driven by our feeling that we lack those things, and we believe that we will achieve happiness and satiety if we obtain them. But as soon as we do achieve one of our desires, it begins to lose the appeal that drew us to it in the first place, and we begin to desire other things. This is an endless and inescapable process. It means that the world consists of endless suffering because we are always aware of a lack of something or other, and any fulfilment of desire is always short-lived and leads to the arising of new desires. Longing is eternal, satisfaction brief and illusory.

We therefore find ourselves living in a world of illusion and suffering, and with an unquenchable thirst for an unknown and hidden world of true unity. One of the primary intimations of this world of unity, according to Schopenhauer, comes from our facility for compassion. Egotism and selfishness derive from the desire to benefit oneself at the expense of others. But the self that benefits from this is, as we have seen, an illusory construct that veils the deeper truth. Compassion and pity begin to erase the boundaries between the illusory phenomena of individuals, and to reveal the hidden unity that actually lies behind appearance. So selfishness reinforces the illusion of discrete phenomena, whereas compassion unveils the truth that everything is the manifestation of an undifferentiated will.

Another way in which we may apprehend this noumenal reality is through art. Art is a means whereby the will is able to objectify itself, and this is achieved

with reference to Platonic Ideas. Schopenhauer sees these Ideas, which are eternal and unchanging forms outside the incessant becoming and passing away of nature, as "definite grades of the objectification of that will, which forms the in-itself of the world."[25] In other words, art is able to step outside the individuated world of representation and partake of the undifferentiated world of eternal Ideas. Because art takes us to this noumenal place, we are able to feel a sense of completeness, or rather the absence of willing, whilst we contemplate the art object. With this quietening of the will, suffering recedes and we are able to apprehend the unity of things.

Schopenhauer singles out music as a special art form quite unlike all the others. Whereas other art forms are concerned with representing the essential and universal elements of things, music is not representational in the same way. Instead, Schopenhauer sees music as being a direct manifestation of will: "Therefore music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a *copy of the will itself*, the objectivity of which are the Ideas. For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence."[26]

When Wagner discovered Schopenhauer, the effect was utterly revelatory. He had spent years carefully devising a theoretical scheme for opera wherein the text was paramount and the music needed to be subordinated to it. Now he found in Schopenhauer a philosophical explanation of music's superiority to other art forms, and of its deeper resonance, its natural tendency to articulate the essence of things. Wagner's conversion first manifested itself in the scores for *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*, although the libretti for those works had already been written. Of the three operas fully composed after his conversion to Schopenhauer's philosophy, *Parsifal* was the one he considered to be "the crowning achievement."[27]

Wagner's *Parsifal* tells the story of the Grail Knights and their King, Amfortas. They are responsible for guarding the Holy Grail and the spear which was used to pierce the side of Christ during His crucifixion. But Amfortas is wounded; he was stabbed with the same spear by the evil magician Klingsor, who then stole it. Amfortas' wound will now not heal. Klingsor has also disempowered the Knights by seducing them with his flower maidens. Until the Knights can win back the spear, the holy rites seem empty, and the land has become a wasteland. A prophecy has been given by the Grail that the spear will only be won back by one "made wise through pity, the pure fool." Parsifal himself is introduced to the drama when he kills a swan. He does not know why

he killed the swan, and it transpires that he is ignorant of his parentage, and he does not even know his own name. Evidently, he is the prophesied fool. But Parsifal cannot understand the Grail Knights' rites, and so he is dismissed as a mere fool, not the prophesied redeemer. He soon finds his way to Klingsor's castle where Kundry, who is simultaneously a servant of the Knights and, unknown to them, one of Klingsor's maidens and a slave of his dark magic, attempts to seduce him. This is the cause of an epiphany for Parsifal. With the arrival of sexual arousal, Parsifal is no longer the innocent fool he was, but is immediately able to overcome this desire and exercise a will-less compassion. He then becomes the pure fool who will fulfil the prophecy. He wins the spear from Klingsor and uses it to heal Amfortas' wound. Klingsor and his castle disappear: they were mere phenomena, and Parsifal has revealed their illusory character. It transpires that Kundry was present at Christ's crucifixion and that she mocked Him. She has been trapped in an eternal life of repentance ever since. Now Parsifal, through his compassion, has redeemed her. At the close of the opera, on Good Friday, the sacred rites are once more performed but this time with appropriate numinosity. Parsifal is acknowledged as the Redeemer.

The influence of Schopenhauer throughout *Parsifal* is absolutely clear. The world of *Parsifal* is one of ubiquitous and lingering suffering. The Grail Knights are condemned to meaningless ritual because of their failure to remain chaste. By succumbing to sexual desire, they are chained to the illusory pleasures of the world, and these pleasures, as Schopenhauer has it, are transient, illusory, and outweighed by the greater reality of suffering. Kundry, through her mockery of Christ, is locked in an eternity of suffering. The significant point to Kundry's suffering is not that she is being punished for mocking God, but that she suffers due to a lack of compassion. By laughing at the suffering of Christ, she failed to recognize that the suffering of one is, in essence, the suffering of all. The eponymous hero is able to redeem the Grail Knights through compassion, by realizing the hidden reality behind the illusory phenomena conjured by Klingsor. When Parsifal causes Klingsor's realm to disappear, he is banishing the world of mere appearance, with all its beguiling desires and pleasures. The final redemption comes from the realization that compassion reveals the hidden essence of unity behind all phenomena. This redemption is not effected through the divinity of Christ; the Good Friday scene is the fulfilment of this redemption, and the Redeemer is Parsifal. Redemption comes from the acceptance of the singular essence of the will and the unity of all things, not from a supernatural intervention.

There is also an interesting structural resonance with Schopenhauer's thought. Amfortas' wound is an analogue of the suffering of Christ: his wound was

caused by the same spear that pierced the side of Christ. But when Parsifal enters the drama, he shoots a swan with an arrow. The swan is a symbol of the sacred, so this image again recapitulates the piercing of Christ. In this way, a threefold analogue of suffering becomes a depiction of the Schoperhauerian idea that the will is a unified whole which merely appears to become separate and distinct in various manifestations. The trinity of pain enfolded into the drama exemplifies the notion that the suffering of Christ is important because it is the suffering of all, even of animals. The importance of Christ for Wagner, as for Schopenhauer, comes from the fact that his story of suffering and redemption through surrendering the will is a universal truth and is a metaphysical reality inherent in all living things.

Parsifal is not a Christian work of art, despite what many seem to think. It is a work of art which elaborates a sophisticated piece of secular philosophy. The importance of *Parsifal*, and perhaps the source of misunderstanding, comes from the fact that it is a secular, atheist work which nonetheless presents the reality of transcendence as a proximate and intimate possession of all living things. The Grail hall is a place where "Time is one with Space." When Parsifal approaches this hall with one of the Grail Knights, Gurnemanz, the stage directions indicate that the scene begins to change: "The woods disappear and in the rocky walls a gateway opens, which closes behind them . . . Gurnemanz turns to Parsifal, who stands as if bewitched."[28] Clearly, the Grail Knights are guarding a numinous place, or at least a place infused with numinous emanations from the Grail itself, but deeper than this they are guarding the concept of transcendence itself. And, with his portrayal of Schopenhauer's ideas concerning the possibility of redemption within a secular framework, Wagner himself is guarding the possibility of transcendence against the ongoing decline of Christianity.

When Nietzsche first read *Parsifal*, and heard the sound of swords clashing, he had come to view the notion of transcendence, whether through religion or through art, as an impossibility. Whilst he had already decisively rejected religion, he had gone still further and questioned the notion that there is a metaphysical side to existence at all. Despite his friendship with Wagner and his earlier allegiance to Schopenhauer, he had come to the conclusion that such a metaphysical realm, the hidden unity of the essence, simply did not exist; or that if it did exist, it was completely unknowable to man and so not worth considering.

Nietzsche had come to realize that Schopenhauer, in working out his philosophical worldview, had taken a number of impermissible steps. When Schopenhauer had described the phenomenal world of appearance as illusory, he

was entirely correct, but he then went on to assume that there must be a world of ultimate reality, a "real" world distinct from representation, lying anterior to the apparent world. Nietzsche questions why, if we are constantly deceived about the nature of the apparent world, we should give any credence to speculations about a hidden world. In fact, he goes on to question why, if such a world anterior to appearance did in fact exist, it should be assumed to have any greater validity than the world of "mere" appearance: "It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world. Let at least this much be admitted: there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances."[29]

In addition, when Schopenhauer perceived the will as an intimately known presence within himself, he falsely assumed that it was a singular and entirely comprehensible force. From this perception he elaborated an entire and undifferentiated reality behind the world of appearance. But Nietzsche realizes that the will cannot be described in such a way. For Nietzsche, the will is something that emerges as the result of a conflict of impulses and desires that exist simultaneously within an individual. The act of willing emerges as the effect of the most domineering of these impulses. Crucially, it is the result of a prior battle that gives rise to the act of willing, and it is an error to ascribe this will to "the synthetic concept 'I'."[30] The individual contains many souls, and the one that wins the battle of the wills becomes identified as the individual's will. In this respect, Nietzsche has stood Schopenhauer's thinking on its head. Instead of a unified whole manifesting itself as plurality, Nietzsche perceives a battleground of competing interests, one of which achieves victory and is then assumed to be the volition of an integrated agent. From here it is a short step to the realization that "life simply is will to power."[31]

This realization reveals another false step in Schopenhauer's argumentation, or rather a severe error of evaluation. If there is assumed to be a holistic and in some sense "higher" reality behind appearances, then this reality assumes a position of superiority to the world of appearances. In Nietzsche's terms, this means that a fictional world has the whip hand over the real world: "Once the concept 'nature' had been devised as the concept antithetical to 'God,' 'natural' had to be the word for 'reprehensible'—this entire fictional world has its roots in *hatred* of the natural (—actuality!—), it is the expression of a profound disgust with the actual . . . *But that explains everything*. Who alone has reason to *lie himself out* of actuality? He who *suffers* from it. But to suffer from actuality means to be an abortive actuality . . . The preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure is the cause of a fictitious morality and

religion: such a preponderance, however, provides the formula for *decadence* . . .”[32] Although this polemic is aimed at the Christian concept of God, the point is equally applicable to Schopenhauer’s world of will. And, once more, Nietzsche has turned Schopenhauer’s thought on its head. Rather than suffering and want being caused by the splintering of a prior unity into discrete phenomena, Nietzsche sees the presence of suffering in the individual as the cause of the creation of this fictional world of unity. It is simply a palliative created to alleviate dissatisfaction with the real.

Of course, this is no neutral matter of academic philosophy; it is fundamental to knowing whether it is possible or desirable to believe in the existence of a noumenal world, whatever its character might be. The existence or non-existence of such a transcendent world has ultimate implications for questions concerning God, life after death, and so on. And this is why Nietzsche’s attack on Wagner’s perceived decadence was so vociferous: “He flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and disguises it in music; he flatters everything Christian, every religious expression of decadence. Open your ears: everything that ever grew on the soil of *impoverished* life, all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond, has found its most sublime advocate in Wagner’s art.”[33] And this is the heart of the matter: the counterfeiting of transcendence. When one becomes a fellow traveller with Nietzsche, one realizes the intellectual impossibility of accepting notions of transcendence. The very idea of transcendence itself becomes anathema because it implies a belittling of the here and now, of actuality. Consequently, art that posits transcendence as an ultimate aim becomes risible, and the beauty of Wagner’s opera dissipates like Klingsor’s castle. But whilst one listens to the music of *Parsifal* and becomes immersed in the extraordinarily high level of dramatic development, the possibility of transcendence comes back into focus and inspires an intuitive yearning to grasp it: the ultimate Grail quest. And, in fact, when Nietzsche actually heard *Parsifal* for the first time he was to write, “Did Wagner ever compose anything better? The finest psychological intelligence and definition of what must be said here, expressed, communicated, the briefest and most direct form for it, every nuance of feeling pared down to an epigram; a clarity in the music as descriptive art, bringing to mind a shield with a design in relief on it; and, finally, a sublime and extraordinary feeling, experience, happening of the soul, at the basis of the music, which does Wagner the highest credit.”[34]

Wagner’s desire to present Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in artistic form might appear now to be an item of merely historical interest. But what we know intellectually will not always remain sovereign, and *Parsifal* is unlikely to be the

last time we seriously consider the possibility of transcendence.

Tapiola:

Sibelius & the God

of the Wood

Tapiola is the last major work to have been composed by Jean Sibelius. It was commissioned by the New York conductor Walter Damrosch at the beginning of 1926 and was premiered on Boxing Day of the same year. Damrosch asked for a symphonic poem with the choice of subject matter left to the composer. For inspiration Sibelius turned, as he so often did, to the *Kalevala*, the collection of Finnish folklore that looms so large in his work.

Sibelius was 60 when he began work on *Tapiola*, and his reputation as Finland's greatest composer was already sealed. He had become a quasi-official national composer due to his overt nationalism in supporting Finland's right to independence against both Russian and Swedish domination. It is probably no great exaggeration to say that he was one of the most popular composers of the twentieth century, at least in Scandinavian and Anglophone countries. In the heart of the European musical culture there was a large degree of suspicion about his popularity and a feeling that he was insufficiently modern, meaning that he was not in thrall to Schoenberg. Germany did come to love Sibelius, albeit in the 1930s and 1940s when he became a semi-official Nazi composer, allegedly telling the German troops in a message, "I wish with all my heart that you may enjoy a speedy victory."[35] He thus became a favorite of both Berlin and New York.

Tapio is the god of the woodland and Tapiola is his home. Sibelius's tone poem paints a rich picture of this homeland and succeeds in animating it with an array of supernatural entities. The score of Tapiola contains an explanatory quatrain:

> Wide-spread they stand, the Northland's dusky forests,
> Ancient, mysterious, brooding savage dreams,
> Within them dwells the Forest's mighty God,
> And wood-sprites in the gloom weave magic spells.

Humanity is fortunate indeed that Sibelius devoted his energies to music rather than poetry, but note nonetheless the capitalizations of both "Forest" and

“God” in the third line. For Sibelius, there is a subtle and important identification to be made between the two.

The music begins with a bold melodic motif that is repeated throughout. In fact, the piece has been called monothematic. This should not be seen as a criticism, however. What Sibelius does, and does brilliantly, is to unfold and examine this motif with varying emphases and instrumentation. As the work progresses, there is a sense that these discrete and distinctive reformulations of an underlying theme somehow evoke into being the varied life forms of the forest. The manifold entities are unique and yet unified in a higher organizing principle, the tone poem’s motif itself, which yields to successive embodiments, yet remains animated by its own structural discipline. The mood of the piece is neither light nor dark; it does not seem to be expressive of individual emotion. Instead, it is a restive depiction of the forest with all its implied distance from human civilization.

Towards the end, the music recedes to silence, from which emerges a remarkable storm of sound. The strings slide up and down in a confusion of dissonance whilst brass intrudes with ominous intent. This is the presence of Tapio, and it induces a sensation of panic. Like the Greek Pan from whom we have the word “panic,” Tapio seems to bring the terror of nature, of uncontrolled and unconquered forces. Beyond the familiarity of the Northern European village, or still more outside the modern city, the forest holds a certain primal terror embodied in the numinous figure of the woodland God.

After the cacophony of Tapio’s appearance, the music returns to a form of the recurring motif, now calmer and quieter. The meeting with the God and the terror invoked thereby have led to a more mature state of being and greater wisdom. Something has been learned from the woodland spirits.

Damrosch was delighted with Sibelius’ work and wrote to him that “only a Norseman could have written it.” Although this judgement plays into the hands of those who deprecate Sibelius for his provincialism, it is astute. Sibelius conjures a numinous experience in this piece. The *numen* is the presiding god of a particular place. The word is related to the Latin *nuere*, nod, and to the Greek *neuein*, incline the head, indicating an assent or command. Thus, the word indicates the effects of the power of the deity. Musicologists tend to be impressed with Sibelius’ use of atonality in the climactic encounter with Tapio; it suggests an incipient respect for avant-gardism largely absent from much of his other work. The interesting thing about the way that Sibelius uses this atonal moment, though, is that it is subservient to a greater overarching musical narrative. There is no reason why atonality cannot be used in music; it is especially effective in horror film music, for example. The problem with

atonality is the hubristic attitude of its proponents, who regard their listeners as imbecilic dullards needing to be shocked out of their nineteenth-century preoccupations.

The moment of confrontation with Tapio is actually difficult to listen to calmly. It impinges on bodily sensation, creating a constriction of breath and raising the hairs at the back of the neck. When it passes and calm is restored, the calmness is enhanced and more deeply appreciated. Like ghost stories that disrupt the natural order only to reinforce it at the end, the disorientation caused by the numinous panic of facing the God results in a more profound restoration of natural balance and a richer appreciation of the beauty that was always there. For the academic avant-garde, this is mere conservatism. But the important point is that Sibelius' music is deeply rooted in the primal landscape of his homeland. Regardless of the stories of the *Kalevala* that inspired him, his art is a primal expression of the numinous due to the genius of his interfusing melody with the landscape. His music is grounded, rooted; almost mystically expressive of the land. The arid intellectuality of much twentieth century composition withers away in comparison.

Tapiola benefits from a comparison with a later work, *Tabula Rasa* by Arvo Pärt. Like *Tapiola*, *Tabula Rasa* is a meditation on a theme and it submits its theme to a series of experimental unfoldings. In its first movement, "Ludus," the melody is deconstructed and its chromatic implications are worked out to great effect. Like *Tapiola*, *Tabula Rasa* has a certain numinous, or mystical, quality, but of a quite different type. *Tabula Rasa* is a fractal meditation, closely examining a natural unfolding such as the growth of a leaf. It is mystical in a Blakean sense, a revealing of the enfolded mysteries of nature, and whilst ably communicated through art, it is a visionary moment of realization granted only to the few. It is an illuminated manuscript in music. Sibelius' confrontation with his God is not visionary in the same sort of way. It is the feeling of being alone in the woods, far from humanity. It is a universal feeling (at least amongst Northern Europeans) and is inductive of pre-civilizational fears. The feelings of loneliness and vulnerability are the guards against hubris and the seeds of the numinous.

Tapiola is a beautifully pagan work of art. It expresses the numinous directly, without recourse to elaborate theological concepts. It also shows that any musical technique is a valid one for the artist so long as he utilizes it in furtherance of man's engagement with the natural and sacred, not in pursuit of his own intellectual abstractions. Disorientation can have pedagogic value, but only if reorientation subsequently occurs.

Sibelius lived for thirty more years, but composed nothing of value in that

time. He destroyed his Eighth Symphony, and it remains lost. It is almost as if the confrontation with his God of the woods left him with nothing further to say. He had turned the numinous into art, and there is nothing greater for an artist to achieve. *Tapiola* remains a significant and numinous work of Northern European art.

The Confession of Isobel Gowdie

The Confession of Isobel Gowdie is an orchestral work by the Scottish composer James MacMillan. It was premiered at the 1990 BBC Proms, where it drew instant and enduring acclaim.

Isobel Gowdie lived in the northwest of Scotland and was tried for witchcraft in the late seventeenth century. There is no record of her ultimate fate, but MacMillan assumes that she was executed by being strangled at the stake and then burned in pitch. According to MacMillan, 4,500 witches were executed in Scotland after the Reformation. Across Europe, the numbers executed are disputed, but the uppermost figure is 9 million, as suggested by Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle.[36] In any case, the phenomenon of the witch hunt has left an ineradicable scar on the European psyche.

Gowdie's case is extremely peculiar, as she made several confessions to witchcraft apparently without coercion. These confessions are the most detailed surviving accounts of practicing witchcraft from the period, yet they are idiosyncratic and do not match well with other accounts. She was said to be a beautiful, flame-haired young woman, but her father married her to a dull Kirk elder with whom she seems to have endured a loveless marriage. On one of her many walks in the woodland surrounding their farm, Isobel met Margaret Brodie, a half-gypsy who had psychic powers. Brodie told Isobel that she looked forward to seeing her at the local Kirk. Walking home from this meeting, Isobel then met the devil, disguised as a handsome stranger. He also said that he would see Isobel at the local Kirk.

When she kept the appointment with these strange new companions, Isobel found herself inducted into a coven of thirteen. The devil bit her shoulder until it bled and then baptized her with the blood, smearing it on her forehead and naming her "Jonet."

The devil became Isobel's lover. She learned to conjure a doppelganger who took her place with her husband whilst Isobel was diabolically cuckolding him. She also learned various other forms of evil magic including elf shot, weather magic, and a form of voodoo doll cursing. Isobel also learned to transform herself into a number of different beasts.

Isobel Gowdie's confessions contain all of this material and also recount her visits to Elf Land, where she met the King and Queen of fairies. Interestingly, one of the most famous of the Scottish Border Ballads, "Tam Lin," concerns a

young woman named Janet who becomes pregnant by the eponymous elf. In order to win Tam Lin from the Queen of Fairies, Janet has to catch him when he rides with his supernatural comrades and hold on to him as he transforms into various beasts.

It seems likely to me that Isobel had come to identify herself with some of the characters from local folklore and that she extrapolated a complex and radically heretical fantasy life from such sources. Perhaps she drew suspicion by befriending the half-gypsy, Brodie, or perhaps she was actually learning some sort of esoteric knowledge from her that would have been deemed heretical by her community and by the Church. There is also the possibility that the events related in Isobel's confessions were accurate descriptions of visionary experiences she had. Such visions may have been provoked by the use of "flying ointment," a concoction of natural drugs that was absorbed through the skin (as it would be too toxic to ingest). This ointment produces hallucinations and an irregular heartbeat, which can give a feeling of flying. (This is similar to the sensation of falling, which can be experienced when falling asleep, again caused by the heartbeat becoming irregular.) It is speculated that the ointment may sometimes have been applied by smearing it onto a broomstick which was then used as a dildo; hence the association with witches flying on broomsticks.

It might also be possible that Isobel was a homosexual woman whose liaisons with Brodie caused consternation. In this regard, it may be telling that she claimed to conjure a doppelganger to take her place when she was rutting with the devil. The idea that her husband would not notice the difference can be read as a sly, satirical comment on his lack of sexual attention.

All of this is rather speculative, but it does make the point that we are compelled to reimagine the context of the witch trials according to our own preoccupations. In any case, Gowdie was tried for witchcraft, and it is perplexing that she seems so readily to have confessed to sins for which there could be no clemency.

MacMillan's *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* creatively evokes this extraordinary historical event in an intensely dialectical work. Essentially, it consists of three parts: an opening section of calmness; a middle section of violence; and a closing section that returns to the calmness of the beginning but with a memory of the preceding violence. The sense of opposition between violence and peace, as also between the secular and the religious, suffuses the piece with a sense of irresolution that is never entirely banished.

The music begins very quietly with a drone. As other instruments emerge, a series of not necessarily connected melodies play out. The tone is light and suggestive of folk music, although hidden within the shifting sounds is the *Lux*

Aeterna from the Requiem Mass. MacMillan has stated that he wanted this piece to be the Requiem for Isobel Gowdie that she never had. The opening threnody evokes an almost pastoral scene of quietude, but the *Lux Aeterna* is a subliminal reminder that the life (and power) of the Church is always present. Does this provide a sense of comfort by reminding us of the light eternal, or is it an ominous warning of the violence that the Church will enact on Isobel? MacMillan establishes an ambiguity of expression that allows for multiple readings.

Six or so minutes into the piece, the mood changes. This is partly heralded by the introduction of percussion, which disrupts the elegiac strings. But even the strings change in mood and start to sound discordant. Even though Isobel Gowdie's confession was obtained without torture, MacMillan is disturbed by the use of torture to obtain confessions of witchcraft, and he reflects that in this movement. As the sound imagery becomes more disturbing, there is a sudden and violent disruption of the music by a series of full orchestra strokes. To my mind, this discordant, stabbing sound is reminiscent of the music from the shower scene in the film *Psycho*. In fact, there are thirteen of these stabbing strokes, which brings Isobel's imaginary coven into central focus. The music is violently accusatory, and we sense that Isobel's fate has already been sealed.

As the piece progresses, a sort of calm is established as the sound world of the opening section returns. The strings again become lyrical, but the percussion and brass continue to interrupt incessantly, like a bad memory. The resurgence of the percussive elements acts as a sort of after-image of the preceding violence. The closing section is a sort of synthesis of the dialectical opposition set up by the first two: harmonic peace reasserts itself, but the violence done to Isobel cannot be downplayed.

MacMillan is a Roman Catholic, and, to his credit, he does not seek to conclude Isobel's story with an assertion of Christian piety. Any sense of contrition is muddied with an honest account of the horror for which contrition is sought. The Christian message that preoccupies MacMillan can only exist alongside the secular harmonies that (we imagine) would have preoccupied Isobel. MacMillan thus manages to create a rather humane account of Isobel's story, one which allows space for her own voice to seek expression. In describing the work, he has said, "On behalf of the Scottish people the work craves absolution and offers Isobel Gowdie the mercy and humanity that was denied her in the last days of her life."[37]

MacMillan is not a radical composer, and much of the power of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* comes from knowledge of the source material from

which it derives. Nonetheless, his achievement in this work is considerable. It is an unusual work, partly due to the strange subject matter, but also due to the fact that this is a religious work which is, at least partly, condemnatory of religion. It is simultaneously accessible yet ambiguous. To conclude, we might ask a thirteen-word question. Could *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* be a *genuine* work of Christian humility?

GIACINTO SCELSI

> "Rome is the boundary between East and West. South of Rome, the East starts, and north of Rome, the West starts. This border-line now runs exactly over the Forum Romanum. There's my house, this explains my life and my music."
>
> —Giacinto Scelsi

The music of Giacinto Scelsi is still relatively obscure, which is in keeping with the reclusive and esoteric character of the composer himself. Undoubtedly, the largest exposure of his work came from its inclusion in the soundtrack to the Martin Scorsese film *Shutter Island*, where the sinister, atonal qualities of his music resonate with the oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere of that terrifying movie. Otherwise, Scelsi languishes in a largely self-created niche where no one other than twentieth-century avant-garde musicologists dares to tread.

This is a shame because his music, despite its imposing and chilling veneer, actually communicates its inner secrets remarkably effectively. Unlike so much post-Schoenberg composition, Scelsi's works are incredibly articulate and manage to carry the listener on a rich and rewarding musical journey into a sense of cosmic stillness. Despite his obscurity, Scelsi's distinctive aesthetic may find its most fertile audience amongst Radical Traditionalists, particularly those already weaned on the likes of Nurse with Wound, early Current 93, and Boyd Rice. More generally, Scelsci is one of the few composers, along with Pärt and Ligeti, who is able to utilize late twentieth-century composition in the service of a mystical, numinous approach to art, and he deserves far wider recognition.

Giacinto Scelsi was born in 1905 and grew up in a castle in the medieval town of Valva in Italy. He was the last Count of Dayala Valva, and his schooling at the castle comprised fencing, Latin, and chess. His aristocratic background may give some context to his rather aloof attitude to self-publicity. He would typically refuse to have his photograph taken (the only pictures on the Internet are of Scelsi as a young man) and he steadfastly resisted giving any explanation of his work whatsoever. His signature incorporated a drawing of a circle with a horizontal line beneath it, a rather Zen-like sigil, perhaps signifying the Sun and Earth, or perhaps the void and manifestation. He would supply a copy of this drawing to publishers whenever he was asked to provide a photograph of himself. When he married a cousin of Queen Elizabeth II, the wedding reception was held at Buckingham Palace, demonstrating that his aristocratic credentials

were entirely in order.

Scelsi was initially influenced by Surrealism and Futurism, and he studied under a pupil of Schoenberg (although, like much else in Scelsi's biography, this is not certain). His early compositions were created under the influence of the twelve- tone system and are predictably unremarkable. But in 1950, Scelsi suffered a complete nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. For the next couple of years, as he sought to heal himself, he would spend long periods playing a single note repeatedly on his piano. In doing so, he began to hear the hidden potentialities lying concealed within this monotonous sound. The latent vibrational and microtonal functions of the note spoke to him and suggested an entirely new way of approaching musical composition, one which would move away from a focus on harmonics and towards an investigation into the sonic potentialities of the tone.

It is significant that this new orientation towards the praxis of composition was associated with a period of healing. For Scelsi, music was fundamentally connected with therapeutic and spiritually enlightening possibilities, and so his compositional investigations dovetailed happily with his esoteric interests. With this mature phase of his work, Scelsi was able to establish a unique musical vision, and the results would bequeath some of the late twentieth century's more remarkable avant-garde pieces.

By this time, Scelsi had already visited India and Tibet and had become obsessed with the spiritual life that he had discovered there. He was a practitioner of yoga and was familiar with the occult works of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff. Interestingly, Gurdjieff was also interested in the spiritual effects of music, and he collaborated with Thomas de Hartmann on a number of piano compositions experimenting with these ideas.[38] It has to be said that the fruits of this collaboration, whilst being interesting, are far less notable than Scelsi's major works.

Of course, like many Westerners who find spiritual inspiration from such sources, Scelsi stands open to accusations of being a metaphysical tourist. This was very much a live issue in the early part of the twentieth century, and during a 1924 roundtable held in Paris at which Scelsi was present, René Guénon, Jacques Maritain, and Ferdinand Ossendowski debated some of these matters. Guénon was insistent that Eastern practices have a truth of their own, whilst Maritain was concerned that an appeal to the East would undermine the unique truth of Catholicism:

> **Maritain**: Theology, supported on the revealed principles of faith, is the supreme science.

Guénon: No, it is only a determinate of metaphysics, I speak of the true and authentic metaphysical wisdom. This goes well beyond.
Maritain: No science goes beyond revealed faith. Moreover, does Hindu wisdom know the complete way, not only the order of morality properly called, what we call merit, sin, etc. but also the order of charity?
Ossendowski: The Mongolian people are honest, peaceful, and deeply worthy; they practice hospitality. But there is in effect no place in eastern religion for charity in the sense of the love of God
Guénon: That is a sentimental element and consequently secondary.[39]

Scelsi's own approach seems to accord with Guénon's. He appears to appreciate the truths expressed in a number of different religions and appears not to regard their exploration as in any way problematic. This Traditionalist approach to matters of religion helps to explain much about Scelsi's work, not least the vast and often obscure range of references in the titles of his works.

When Scelsi returned to composition in the early 1950s, he had discovered a new focus and a new technical and aesthetic approach. His 1959 masterpiece, *Quattro Pezzi chiascuno su una nota sola* (Four Pieces on a Single Note), showcases his mastery of this new form to perfection. Each piece lasts only for a few minutes, but it seems to arrive fully-formed and already consummated. There is little sense of linear progression; instead, Scelsi seeks to step outside the path of temporal development and to put a single note under an auditory microscope. The irony is that such an approach reveals a great deal of movement and harmony already implicit in the note. The *Quattro Pezzi* does not stick strictly to the one note rule, but nevertheless it provides the template for Scelsi's mystical audio meditations that were to follow.

Through the 1960s and '70s, Scelsi continued to produce meditative, stark, and imposing compositions, few of which were performed. He began to give his compositions strange and distinctive titles. During this period he produced works such as *Xnoybis "The ability of energy to ascend to spirit," Uaxuctum "The Legend of the Maya City which destroyed itself for religious reasons,"* and *Konx-Om-Pax "Three aspects of sound: as the first motion of the immovable, as creative force, as the Syllable 'om'."*

Konx-Om-Pax is one of Scelsi's best-realized works and is highly typical of his style. The title is taken from a work by Aleister Crowley, and comprises the word "peace" rendered in three different languages. Composed in 1968-69, this three-part work begins with a very quiet and slow introduction in the first part. The music appears as a swelling, yet distant, tidal surge, ebbing and flowing, and gradually increases in force and volume as the movement progresses. Then it

drops away as the tide recedes. The second part is only two minutes long, and, as the title tells us, it represents creative force. It is a brief tornado of brass, strings, and percussion, but even here there is a sense of natural, cyclical flow. In the final movement, the chorus is introduced chanting the sacred syllable "Om." This is perhaps the essence of Scelsi's work: the distillation of creative energy, of the life-force itself, into a single sound. As is usually the case with Scelsi, the simplicity of the arrangement is deceptive. The orchestral sweeps that enhance the pulsing tone of the voices actually do quite a lot, but these are not decorative ornamentation so much as the revealing of inner functions within the sound itself; explications of the implicit.

With this sort of range of cultural references, it might be assumed that Scelsi's *oeuvre* is a typically post-modern project, assimilating diverse signifiers at will and with little authenticity. Such a post-modern approach is, of course, deeply influenced by New Left thinkers who deny the legitimacy and authority of Tradition and instead insist that all sorts of foreign elements should enjoy a greater cultural status. In his essay on Bach, Theodor Adorno attempts to argue that Bach was a sort of proto-post-modernist whose artistic instincts led him towards increasing individualism, and whose archaic and formulaic tendencies were simply contingent necessities of the time. According to Adorno, Bach's compositional technique:

> brings with it the possibility of freely choosing from all the objectively available procedures of the epoch. Bach does not feel himself blindly bound to any of them but instead always chooses that which best suits the compositional intention. Such liberty vis-à-vis the ancient however, can hardly be construed as the culmination of the tradition, which instead must prohibit just that free selection of available possibilities.[40]

Is Scelsi cherry-picking from varied cultural sources in a post-modern way? Would Adorno have approved of his music? I think the answer to both questions is "no." For Adorno, history is false consciousness; tradition is always a spurious concept. Scelsi is a composer who venerates the past and who attempts to discover the hidden esoteric essence of long-dead cultures. And there's the rub. He is no historical re-constructionist; he does not attempt to recreate the outer, exoteric form of other musical traditions. Instead, he seems to use his strange titles as a sort of bridge to the sound-world he is already preoccupied with. Just as religions use iconography to provide a tangible form to that which is beyond expression, so do Scelsi's titles give a contextual touchstone to the deeper articulations of the music. Whereas for Adorno, and for the contemporary Left,

tradition represents constriction and the false notion of a prior essence, for Scelsi the numinous essence is everywhere, a latent energy folded within itself. His task is to reveal the essence by listening for the hidden structure within the apparently simple and singular. Still further, Scelsi identifies music with genesis: “Yes, one might consider sound the cosmic force that is the basis of everything. There is a beautiful definition that says: ‘Sound is the first movement of the unmoveable,’ and this is the beginning of creation.”[41] On this basis, Scelsi’s aesthetic runs entirely counter to the assumptions of post-modernity. His preoccupation with strange cultural references and occult practices is not an attempt to posit a spurious parity between distinct traditions, but to use them as stepping stones on a path that leads back to a point before history. This suggests that Scelsi perceives the numinous as being existant prior to humanity. In this he is utterly radical.

Scelsi’s best works do not readily evoke any particular cultural context, and neither do they express a self-contained sense of narrative progression. Instead, there is a sense of pulsing, of tidal pull, of lunar waxing and waning, of the cold stellar throb of pulsar cycles; always circular, self-regenerating tones, never linear development and evolution. But even here there is a restive quality. The tone is never allowed to become a singular, discrete auditory item. It is seething with the sonic possibilities inherent in its manifestation, so that the music is actually busy, alive, and complex. This marriage of the simple tone with its profound microtonal possibilities is the emblem of Scelsi’s genius.

Giacinto Scelsi died in 1988. According to one of his musical collaborators, the cellist Frances-Marie Uitti, he died on August 8, 1988, although other sources seem to agree that it was actually on August 9. Uitti’s date is influenced by the fact that Scelsi prophesied to her that he would die, “when the eights lined up,” in other words 8/8/88.[42]

Soon after his death, his unusual method of compositional praxis led to posthumous controversy. Scelsi would often make tape recordings on an ondiola which his assistant, Vieri Tosatti, would then transcribe. The ondiola was an early form of electronic keyboard which allowed Scelsi to improvise with long, drawn-out notes, adding vibrato and changing the volume as required, extending the range of sonic possibilities from that offered by the piano. In 1989, Tosatti gave an interview that was published with the title, “Giacinto Scelsi, c’est moi.” In this interview, Tosatti claims that his own role was effectively that of composer, and that Scelsi offered only a vague idea of how the completed composition should appear. In particular, Tosatti claimed that Scelsi would offer him simple drawings of geometrical shapes and invite him to transcribe music

based on his understanding of them.

Tosatti's claims are largely dismissed by music critics because the work he produced independently of Scelsi is widely judged to be massively inferior to Scelsi's own output. Scelsi did absolutely nothing during his lifetime to prevent such controversy from arising. When he was once approached by a writer for information, he declared, "Scelsi is a composer who never existed."[43] Whatever the truth may be, Scelsi's unusual method of composition is noteworthy in itself, and it seems typical of the aristocratically aloof attitude he adopted towards his artistic endeavors.

Whilst Scelsi manages to stand aside from the movement of twentieth century composition, he also manages to anticipate some subsequent developments. Due to his isolation and the rarity of the works' performance, Scelsi could not really be said to be influential. But it is surely the case that he was tapping into certain musical techniques and formulations that would become more important as time went on. Whilst this subliminal influence extends to some of the industrial/noise output mentioned earlier, it can also be discerned in some of the ambient pieces of Brian Eno, which convey a kindred sense of numinous stillness. Eno is also featured on the soundtrack to *Shutter Island*.

But perhaps the most significant series of works to inhabit the aesthetic space cleared by Scelsi's efforts is *The Disintegration Loops* by William Basinski. *The Disintegration Loops* came about when Basinski attempted to transfer some old tapes of music into digital format. As the tapes played in the machine, they literally began to disintegrate and decay. What originally existed as a series of ambient loops becomes gradually transformed into something that takes on a life of its own, even as it is destroyed. The resulting music embodies an organic sense of chronological entropy and the inevitability of running towards death. *The Disintegration Loops* sound ethereal, yet at the same time, as the decay begins to kick in, they are gradually overwhelmed by the harsh dissonance of mortality. It is this sense of dialectical tension, between the unitary stillness of the eternal and the restive dictates of material manifestation, that links *The Disintegration Loops* with Scelsi's aesthetic. *The Disintegration Loops* were completed on September 10, 2001 in New York, and the following day Basinski listened to the *Loops* as the towers collapsed. The work has subsequently entered into contemporary myth. Whilst Scelsi stood aside from the unfolding of post-modernity and sought the eternal note of creation, Basinski's masterpiece, ineradicably associated with the collapse of the Empire's towers, stands at the end of time and plays forever in a looped elegy to a dead Imperium.

When viewed in this light, Scelsi stands as a proto-ambient mystic. But there

is far more to his *oeuvre* than this description would imply. His music expresses the darker, more unnerving aspects of mysticism with which most people are uncomfortable. It is at once beautiful and threatening. It is located on the further fringes of the avant-garde, yet is immediately accessible. His best pieces are fully realized expressions of numinous art, yet they do not seem to be at home within any particular tradition. His music stands on many different borders and resists all easy interpretations. It is the perfect soundtrack for Radical Traditionalism, and I recommend it heartily.

The Dance Continued:

Perichoresis in the Novels of

Alan Garner

The English author Alan Garner's first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, was published in 1960 to critical and popular acclaim. Since then he has gone on to produce a small, but finely wrought, corpus of novels. Where the earlier novels were fairly straightforward children's literature, his subsequent development as a writer has been significant due to the emergence of an increasingly complex use of language, form, and theme. Such is the extent of the radical development of his writing praxis that an admirer of his first book can be forgiven for being totally baffled by his most recent novel, *Thursbitch*, with its intensely poetic use of dialect, its apparently circular structure, and the opaque unveiling of the story. *Thursbitch* is about as far from children's literature as it is possible to get.

During the course of Garner's writing career, the increasing tendency to greater experimentation and complexity has been counterbalanced by a rootedness in the landscape. For Garner, landscape means Alderley Edge, the part of Cheshire where his family came from and where he still lives. Most of Garner's work is set in Cheshire, and it conveys a sense of landscape that is very real and down to earth, but at the same time effects a quasi-mystical sense of sacrament. This keen sense of the land, as a place which is worked and lived upon in mundane ways, but which is transformed thereby into something almost deserving of worship, is a central concern in all of Garner's work.

In his earliest books the sense of a numinous presence in the land is effected through the use of magical characters who live in and around Alderley Edge. As his abilities as a children's writer mature, so too does his treatment of this subject. By the time of his fourth novel, *The Owl Service*, the power of mythology has become akin to an electrical charge, something which can become trapped in a particular place and take possession of its inhabitants in a relentless cycle of re-enactment. In his later novels, the land is a place of accumulated potency, beyond the ken of the individuals who feel it. At the heart of Garner's work is the thin masterpiece *Red Shift* which, although marketed as a children's novel, bears greater resemblance to his later work. In this book, Garner deploys parallel story arcs from different periods of history to allow the

development of separate, but connected, perspectives on a particular area of Cheshire. The effect of this structure is to allow the emergence of a sense that the land is the main character, and that it is reflecting upon itself.

The ways in which Garner deploys a notion of a mystical presence in the land are varied, but lying at the heart of his work is a realization that there can be perceived a deep sense of connection which can inhere in, and find expression through, the land. This sensibility was expressed by Wordsworth as "something deeply interfused." But Garner's particular insight relates to the way in which he can effectively evoke this sense of something interfused in the land through the particularities of realistic characters who live on it. His is not a grandiose vision of a transcendent elevation achieved through contemplation of the land, but instead of a sacrament achieved through everyday living and working in a particular community rooted in a particular place. The sense of transcendence achieved in this way is all the greater for the feeling that it is achieved by real people in a real place.

This apprehension of something sacred, numinous, which lives in, or is evoked from, the land can be read in all of Garner's novels. The form of expression has become more sublime with each novel, but the key unifying factor to this element of Garner's work is the intrusion into the mundane of a different (not necessarily *higher*) plane of existence. This intersection of different planes can mean the discovery of a magical kingdom, or the careful juxtaposition of different periods of history. Both of these examples, and others besides, can be found in Garner's *oeuvre*. The various forms by which Garner expresses the emergence of the sacred from the natural can be understood as different types of perichoresis.

The word "perichoresis" (Greek περιχώρησις) means "interpenetration." Its literal meaning is "to dance around," from "peri" (around) and "choreo" (to dance, to move).[44] The word was used in the fourth century by the Greek-speaking Fathers to explain the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ.[45] Later, in the seventh century, perichoresis was being used to describe the nature of the Divine Trinity, a usage formally adopted by John of Damascus in the eighth century.[46] When applied to the Trinity, perichoresis means that the three Persons mutually indwell within one another. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct entities with distinct functions, but they share the same substance. In this way, it is possible for the three elements of the Trinity to retain a discrete identity, yet at the same time to share in a unified being. This is the mystery of the one-in-three. The members of the Trinity dwell within one another and dance around one another.

This formal usage of the term perichoresis is restricted, within Christian theology, to the Trinity, but it has also been employed to serve a wider application. Recently, some theologians have realized that perichoresis provides a useful way of understanding quantum physics from a Christian viewpoint. According to the theories and observations of quantum physics, there appears to be such a thing as entanglement, whereby paired photons which become separated will still share a relational connection no matter where in the universe each particle is. Additionally, particles themselves appear to come into existence from a field vacuum, which imparts a holistic relationality to all physical manifestation. Both of these observations can be seen as a scientific confirmation of the concept of perichoresis; that is, the working of the Divine Spirit through the manifest universe is a perichoretic indwelling of the Divine presence in the world, which arises from the unmanifest wholeness of God. Creation is thus a vast, cosmic, dance whereby God animates all things as distinct and individual entities, yet simultaneously unifies them into a greater whole.[47]

Outside of Christian theology, perichoresis has also been used to describe the interpenetration of a supernatural world with the mundane. The English occultist Kenneth Grant has used the word many times in his *Typhonian Trilogies* to illustrate an "interpenetration of dimensions."[48] For Grant, perichoresis represents an intrusion of the noumenal into the phenomenal and is associated with the activities of extraterrestrial intelligences. Such an intrusion can be willed by the occultist through the cultivation of certain states of nether consciousness, or can happen spontaneously, as in the case of encounters with supernatural creatures, whether the "little people" of Arthur Machen's stories, or the alien encounters of the post-war period. Grant also describes the existence of certain mythological and religious figures in terms of this inter-dimensional perichoresis:

> The "founders" of such religions and cults, whether mythical or historical, and whether or not named Krishna, Christ, Rosencreutz, King Arthur, etc., were "aliens" or non-terrestrial entities incomprehensible to human intelligence. . . This is not to say that Christ or Rosencreutz, Krishna or Arthur, may not have been historical characters, but the history for which they are remembered is not mundane history. They are projected into the orbit of humanity on an arc that overlaps, or cuts into, human consciousness at a particular point in time. Their activities constitute a form of *perichoresis* which is not translatable in terrestrial terms.[49]

The analysis in this essay will be drawing on a loose interpretation of the word perichoresis, rather than its formal usage within the Christian Church.

Garner's first two novels, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and its sequel *The Moon of Gomrath*, can be considered together. The story on which both books are based is the legend of Alderley Edge, which is told as a preface to *Weirdstone*. In this legend, a farmer on his way to market is stopped by a wizard who asks to buy his white horse. The farmer refuses, as he only wishes to sell his horse at the market. The wizard then states that no one will buy the horse at market and disappears. As the wizard said, no one will buy the horse that day despite everyone agreeing that it is a fine animal. On his way home with the horse, the farmer once more meets the wizard. This time he agrees to sell. The wizard takes the farmer to a rock on the Edge and taps it with his staff. The rock splits open with a thunderous noise, and the farmer is escorted down a passageway beneath the hill. There he sees 140 sleeping knights, each with a white horse, except for one. The wizard explains that the knights are sleeping until a time when England will be in grave peril. Then they will wake and drive the enemy into the sea. In a further cavern filled with gold and jewels, the farmer is told to take as much as he can carry as payment for the horse. He is then taken back up the passageway and out of the hill. The thunderous noise is heard once more, and he is alone on Alderley Edge. He is never again able to find the place where he entered the hill.

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen tells the story of how two children, Colin and Susan, come to meet the wizard, who is named Cadellin. They learn that the farmer in the legend of Alderley inadvertently took the Weirdstone of Brisingamen from the wizard's cave as part of his payment. Sealed within the jewel is the magical power protecting the sleeping warriors. The Weirdstone, or Bridestone as it is also known, has been handed down through generations and, when it transpires that Susan has now become its possessor, the children become drawn into a battle involving a large cast of supernatural beings and a conflict between light and darkness.

Brisingamen and *Gomrath* do not compare well with Garner's subsequent work, and as they are written as adventure stories for children it might be objected that an enquiry into the treatment of perichoresis in these works will be missing the point. Certainly, there is less of interest in these first two novels than in the later work, but nonetheless Garner's use of his mythological material still provides some points of interest. Primarily, his use of liminal, or threshold, places and times gives an inkling of some of the preoccupations that will be present in his later work.

In *Weirdstone*, it is stated that the children's adventures take place at a time foretold in a prophecy, "Between nine and thirteen all sorrow shall be done."[50] The action takes place between the 9th and 13th of January, with the final battle coming on Friday the 13th. Friday is named after the Norse Goddess Freya, who originally won the Weirdstone of Brisingamen from the Dark Elves. Due to the association with Freya, Fridays are traditionally a day for weddings, and this ties in with the name Bridestone, by which the Weirdstone is also known. The associations of ill-luck that are now attached to Friday the 13th seem to have come about through the familiar process of the Church demonizing all that was associated with the older times. In this case, the taboo against the number thirteen would seem to be an attempt to suppress feminine magic by stigmatizing the lunar year of thirteen months. The taboo around Friday the 13th can then be seen as an attempt to eradicate the feminine moon magic of Freya.

This theme of moon magic is returned to explicitly in *The Moon of Gomrath*. The book features three female characters who are able to practice moon magic. These characters, Susan, Angharad Goldenhand, and the Morrigan represent the new, the full, and the waning moon, respectively.[51] As such, they are three faces of the triple goddess, and, appropriately enough for practitioners of moon magic, they provide a reflection of Trinitarian theology.

The children lose the Weirdstone of Brisingamen when they are caught in a stone circle. There, they "strained to tear themselves free, but they were held like wasps in honey."[52] The stone circle is seen as a place which has a connection to another, supernatural, reality. It is a place of crossing over where a different order of reality can achieve a perichoretic ingress. Similarly, in *Gomrath,* Colin has to find the "old straight track" which is usually invisible, but can be glimpsed under the Gomrath moon. Gomrath is probably meant to correspond to one of the Celtic festivals, perhaps Samhain according to Neil Philip.[53] The idea of the Old Straight Track comes from Alfred Watkins' book of that name, and is the source for modern researches into Ley lines. The point about Garner's use of these ideas is that they are numinous places in the landscape, and liminal stations of the year; they are boundary states that allow for an intersection between different levels of reality. This sense of the magical nature of landscape, and its potential for expressing a trans-personal numinous experience, is something that Garner would go on to explore in profound ways in his later work. The first two novels may compare poorly with his later work, but Garner's depiction of a sacred landscape which allows for a trans-mundane exploration of a different reality is not to be underestimated.

Garner's third novel, *Elidor*, again follows the adventures of a group of

children who inadvertently find themselves in a different reality, but it contains many ambiguous and unsettling elements that serve to elevate it above conventional children's literature. Four siblings wandering rather aimlessly around Manchester find themselves on the site of a slum clearance. One of them accidentally kicks a ball through the window of a derelict church, and the sister, Helen, goes to retrieve it. When she doesn't return, one of the brothers goes to see if she is alright. Again, he does not return, and another brother investigates. Ultimately, the last brother, Roland, enters the church to look for the others. The church acts as a gateway to another world. In this other world, Elidor, Roland finds himself in a landscape that resembles the Neolithic site of Avebury:

> A circle of standing stones crowned the hill. They were unworked and top-heavy; three times bigger than a man and smooth as flint . . . Roland walked into the circle which was easily four hundred yards wide, and at the middle he stopped and gazed round him. From the circle an avenue of stones marched along the ridge, and these were sharp blades of rock, as tall as the circle but cruel and thin. They went straight to a round hill, a mile away . . . It soon became obvious that the hill, for all its mass, was not a part of the ridge but an artificial mound, completely circular, and flat-topped.[54]

The stone circle, as in *Weirdstone*, is a cause of entrapment. When Roland tries to leave the circle, he finds that the gaps between the stones diminish, in a reversal of true perspective, so that he cannot fit between them. This perceptual disorientation is symbolic of the liminal qualities of the stone circle, and suggestive of its potential as a site of extra-dimensional ingress.

The artificial mound, which is called the Mound of Vandwy, and which is modelled on Silbury Hill (and possibly also on Ireland's Newgrange burial mound), has trapped Roland's siblings, and he must enter the mound to rescue them.

In an essay about prehistoric sites in children's literature, Charlie Butler writes:

> In this episode Garner echoes the many legends of fairy mounds which can be entered only at certain times, or by certain people. The story of Roland's rescue is based fairly closely on one such legend, told in the ballad of 'Childe Roland and Burd Ellen'. Such legends have of course often been associated with prehistoric burial chambers, and the Mound of Vandwy's internal construction (in contrast to its Silbury-like external appearance) seems deliberately to echo that of Newgrange in Ireland . . . Like

> Newgrange too the Mound of Vandwy is entered down a long passageway, leading to a central chamber which gives onto three smaller chambers, forming the overall shape of a cross. In Garner's book the smaller chambers each contain one of the three missing treasures of Elidor, a bowl, a stone, and a sword—which, with the spear Roland already carries, recall the four treasures of the Tuatha de Danann, Newgrange's mythological founders . . . I have introduced this episode in the context of a discussion of the use of prehistoric monuments as portals to other worlds. Roland and the rest do not in fact enter Elidor through the Mound of Vandwy, but (like the siblings in the traditional ballad) through a church. However, in choosing the name Vandwy Garner implicitly identifies this mound as a route to an underworld, and Roland's exploit as a rescue from the realm of death, Vandwy being one of the mystical underworld fortresses assailed by Arthur in the Welsh poem 'The Spoils of Annwn.'[55]

In Elidor the children meet Malebron, a Merlin-like figure, who entrusts them with the four treasures and informs them that the fate of Elidor rests in their hands. Contrary to expectation, the story plays out in an ambiguous and unsettling way so that we become unsure whether the children should ever have been appointed with such a dangerous task. Something of the children's peril stems from the attempts of certain denizens of Elidor to enter our world and reclaim the treasures. Their method of ingress is genuinely innovative. The treasures appear to emit some type of electrical charge, and this is used to provide a fix for the invaders from Elidor. It also interferes dramatically with the electrical devices in the children's house. A type of static electricity is also emitted by the brick porch of the children's house. This porch provides a link to Elidor, as it was visualized by Roland to gain entry to the mound of Vandwy. His power of visualization has caused the porch to become "fixed" in Elidor, so that it persists there as a means of possible ingress to our world. It is thus a literal doorway between the two worlds. The mundane, suburban nature of this doorway serves to illustrate the fact that when there is a perichoretic intersection between two realities, there is not just an intrusion of the "higher" reality into the "lower," but rather a reciprocal interference between the two. Garner expands on this point:

> The fault of Roland is that he's always had dreams of an ideal state, and he makes the mistake of assuming that Elidor, and all that has to do with Elidor, Malebron, is this perfection that he's always felt, in his dreams, and so he devotes himself to furthering that end . . . [W]hen Roland looks into

> the eyes of the dying unicorn he sees the Platonic archetypal reality and realises that in order to secure Elidor . . . he has sacrificed reality, that the cost of the simulacrum was the reality, and that's why he was going mad.[56]

The unicorn referred to here is the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy of Elidor. Its appearance is presaged by Roland drawing its shape and writing its name, Findhorn, during a séance at a friend's party. The unicorn appears as the children are walking home down Boundary Lane, which follows a cinder path, "through a no-man's-land between two built up areas."[57] This description suggests that the site of Findhorn's ingress is an ancient boundary which has become a right-of-way, hence its survival between two urban sites. The liminal nature of the location is important for the ingress of the otherworldly creature.

The final showdown with Findhorn takes place on New Year's Eve, another liminal, threshold time, and in the Wasteland of the slum clearance area. Findhorn appears as a wild, scared, wounded horse and behaves accordingly; not at all as one would expect a fairy tale character to behave, and the children are distraught by his wildness. The fulfilment of the prophecy requires Findhorn to sing, but when he does so it is a death rattle, and the sacrifice seems inadequate. The book ends with the following words: "The song faded. The children were alone with the broken windows of a slum."[58] The story ends with a feeling that nothing has been accomplished; that the other world of Elidor is no more perfect than our world; and that supernatural ingress lacks glamour.

Clearly, *Elidor* marks a progression from the earlier books. Garner is no longer using the idea of an alternative reality as a means of creating a fantasy world of excitement. Instead, in *Elidor*, it provides a dark mirror to our own world and inspires a questioning of our need for transcendence. The uncomfortable resolution to the story suggests that transcendence cannot be achieved through the pursuit of an otherworldly reality, and in his subsequent work Garner would continue to explore the possibilities for an understanding of a trans-mundane, trans-personal knowing without the need for a supra-mundane alternative reality.

This movement can be seen in *The Owl Service*, a novel which uses as its source material the story of "Math ap Mathonwy" from the *Mabinogion*. The *Mabinogion* story centers on a love triangle between the girl, Blodeuwedd, who has been made from flowers, her husband Lleu, and Gronw, with whom Blodeuwedd falls in love. Blodeuwedd reveals to Gronw how Lleu can be killed, but when Gronw tries to kill him, Lleu is transformed into an eagle. When Lleu returns to human form, he instead kills Gronw, and Blodeuwedd is turned into an

owl for her betrayal. This source material infects the narrative of *The Owl Service* in complex and interesting ways, and provides for Garner a new way of bringing the trans-mundane, or numinous, into an everyday setting.

Roger and Alison are step-siblings spending the summer at a large house in Wales which has been inherited by Alison after the death of her father. Alison's mother and Roger's father have recently married, and the new family is spending a holiday together for the first time. The house is looked after by Nancy and her son Gwyn, who are native to the valley where the house is located. The discovery of a dinner service decorated with strange, abstracted owl patterns seems to cause Alison to become obsessed with tracing those patterns onto paper and making owl models. As her obsession deepens, we begin to learn that the valley is reputed to be the site of the *Mabinogion* story. A carved stone by the river has a hole in it, and this is claimed by Huw, the elderly Welsh retainer, to be the stone of Gronw. He claims that Gronw threw a spear at Lleu through the hole in the stone; and that they then changed places and Lleu threw the spear at Gronw, killing him. When Roger takes some photographs through the hole in the stone, he finds some anomalies with the prints. Blowing them up, he discovers in one print a man standing in the distance throwing a spear. In another print he sees a figure with a motorbike, though he is sure that no one was there when he took the photos.

The story is somewhat complex, but it emerges that the story of Blodeuwedd, Lleu, and Gronw is eternally recurring in the valley. In each generation a love triangle emerges, and the sexual jealousy involved leads to the "Gronw" figure being killed by the "Lleu" figure. Some years earlier, Nancy became Blodeuwedd, and her lover was killed by Huw, who tampered with the brakes on his motorbike (hence the man with a motorbike in Roger's photo). Now, Alison, Gwyn, and Roger are again compelled to act out the same story. The method of its manifestation is disturbing; the mythic characters seem to appear on the fringes of consciousness, like the figures in Roger's photographs. And Alison hears a scratching in her attic which appears to be some sort of ghostly owl. These hauntings, along with the sexual and class rivalries that simmer in this enclosed environment, serve to generate an extraordinary sense of energy. Garner is able to cleverly utilize this feeling of energy to provide a coherent explanation for the persistence of the mythical phenomena. Gwyn explains:

> I think this valley really is a kind of reservoir. The house, look, smack in the middle, with the mountains all round, shutting it in, guarding the house. I think the power is always there and always will be. It builds up and builds up until it has to be let loose—like filling and emptying a dam. And it

> works through people. I said to Roger that I thought the plates were batteries and you were the wires.[59]

The persistence of the myth as a living force is emphasized by the diction of Huw. Huw is the wise fool who appears to be mad but is actually the most knowledgeable of all the characters. He is a native Welsh speaker, and his mastery of English is not perfect. He is not able to utilize tense properly, so that everything he says is in the present tense. “Not a bad man . . . He is not all to blame. She is setting her cap at him, the other man’s wife . . . He is killing Gronw without anger, without love, without mercy.”[60] And, most memorably, “She wants to be flowers, but you make her owls. You must not complain, then, if she goes hunting.”[61] In this way, he is simultaneously an ignorant fool who speaks in a primitive fashion, but also the only one who can accurately express the reality of the energies that are tied up in the location. By using only the present tense, Huw gives a clue to the fact that the story of Blodeuwedd and her lovers is eternally recurring. It is an ingenious situation, whereby the most obvious indicator of Huw’s social inferiority is, at the same time, the means of his metaphysical eloquence. As is often the case with Garner, the plausibility of the situation facilitates a richness of interpretation.

In *The Owl Service*, the sense of ingress of otherworldly forces is clear and oppressive, but it operates in a different way than in the earlier books. The mythical enactment of Blodeuwedd, Lleu, and Gronw’s love triangle has become trapped in the valley where it first occurred, and the charge it generated can be earthed when the appropriate situation occurs again. If we are to speak of perichoresis in this context, then it is not so much that Alison, Gwyn, and Roger are “possessed” by the archetypes of the *Mabinogion* story, but rather that those archetypes, or energies, indwell in them. It is a subtle distinction, but it can lead to a greater understanding of the nature of the book. The idea of “possession” suggests that each character in the contemporary story is in some way occupied by the presence of the corresponding character from the *Mabinogion*. Whilst it is true that each of the characters has a distinct role to play, just as in the previous enactments, Garner is careful not to suggest that they are losing their will through being subsumed by a supernatural entity. They retain their individuality and rational understanding; they are not taken over. Instead, as Neil Philip has pointed out, they act like wires through which the energy is conducted. In this image, we can see a perfect description of the notion of perichoresis as the presencing, or indwelling, of a mythical energy or life-force in the book’s characters. The characters in *The Owl Service* are compelled to repeat and relive

the primal action because this force continues to live in the landscape. When the conditions are right, they become perichoretically charged with the presence of the force, and, though they retain their individual identities, they become part of a greater reality beyond the ken of a human life-span.

Garner has written about another way in which the force contained in *The Owl Service* was brought to life. In 1969, *The Owl Service* was filmed as an eight-part children's television series. Whilst on the set, Garner would become nauseous during filming to the extent that he began to vomit after each take. When the filming was completed, he had a nervous breakdown. In the essay "Inner Time," Garner describes the process of his recovery at the hands of his psychiatrist. He uses the word "engram" to explain the source of the pain that manifested itself during the filming of *The Owl Service*. An engram "is the term for a hypothetical change in the protoplasm of the neural tissue which is thought by some to account for the working of memory. It is a memory-trace, a permanent impression made by a stimulus or experience."[62] The relevant point about Garner's description of the engram is that it lives in "inner time"; that is, it is hidden from the surface of waking consciousness and is unaffected by the passing of outer time. A particular situation may cause an unwarranted amount of distress because it triggers an emotional resonance with other engrams. The distress that is felt is cumulative and impossible to understand rationally, as it comes from the perspective of inner time and is hidden from conscious apprehension.

Garner relates the idea of the engram to the timeless dimension of the Dreamtime of the Australian aborigines, and more generally to the idea of myth. Inner time allows for the possibility that the individual consciousness is only a fragment of the whole. Indeed, Garner explains that some psychiatrists believe that the engram is capable of being transmitted genetically, so that emotional imprints made by our ancestors can be activated by us. The reason that Garner suffered during the filming of *The Owl Service* was that he was witnessing the manifestation of an inner time reality in outer time. In some sense he had encoded elements of himself and his associated engrams in the writing of the book, but as a written piece they were sufficiently metaphorical to remain inactive. When he witnessed these elements being acted out in outer time, it created a sense of radical confrontation with the suppressed energies of the engrams and resulted in incapacitation. The similarity with the theme of the book, the sudden manifestation of a latent energy, is striking.

Garner sees his experience as having a more general application to Western man. Modern man has turned away from the numinous and allowed his capacity

for experiencing it to atrophy. When confronted with the alternate reality of inner time, whether expressed in the form of myth or psychological trauma, he is unable to understand the nature of that other, timeless state. Art, for Garner, is one way of seeking to understand that timeless state of being that he calls inner time: “Perhaps the artist’s job is to act as cartographer for all navigators, and I simply plot the maps of inner stars.”[63]

The notion of emotional experiences unknowingly connected across time was a central feature of Garner’s next novel, *Red Shift*. *Red Shift* is a subtle and emotionally difficult book whose brevity belies its complexity. As the *Times Literary Supplement* pointed out, “It is probably the most difficult book ever to be published on a children’s list.”[64] Three stories, all of which take place in the same part of Cheshire, intersect and resonate across two millennia. A group of Roman soldiers in the second century have been forced to abandon their legion and are pretending to be members of one of the local tribes. In the seventeenth century, a group of villagers at Barthomley are ruthlessly massacred in the Civil War. And in the early 1970s, two young lovers experience the difficulties of emotional intimacy. No concessions are made to the reader who is looking for a clear narrative structure. Instead, images, impressions, and illusions reflect off and resonate with each other across and within the different stories. *Red Shift* is a poetic masterpiece which successfully attempts to compress the entropic decay of the universe into a series of disconnected relationships.

Running through each of the three narrative strands is a Beaker Period stone axe head. In the Roman story, Macey uses it to establish a berserker rage; in the Civil War story, Thomas keeps it as a good luck charm; and in the modern story, Tom and Jan find it and keep it as a seal of their relationship. The significance of the axe head is both central and elusive. It is an artefact that has no inherent meaning but which acquires meaning through its utility to its possessors. It is clearly a sacred object, but the meaning of this sacredness shifts according to the cultural and personal experiences of its successive owners. At the end of Macey’s story, he buries the axe head in a burial mound at a sacred spot at Barthomley. At the beginning of Thomas’ story, he finds it when digging into the mound, upon which a church has been built. At the end of Thomas’ story, we infer that he will travel to the hill at Mow Cop. And this is where the axe head is discovered by Tom in the modern story.

The way the narrative is structured prevents this chronology of events from being clear on a first reading; it is necessary to reread the book several times to realize the significance of much of what happens. Far from being a flaw in the writing, this, strangely, is a way of exemplifying something that lies at the heart

of the book. A single reading of the book is still rewarding because we care about the characters and their situations, even if we do not grasp the full significance of what happens to them. With further readings we become more aware of the coincidence of location in the different narrative strands, and of the similarity of the relationships. For example, in each of the three stories, Rudheath, Barthomley, and Mow Cop are significant locations, but this is not signaled by the author; it becomes apparent through rereadings. Also, the three main characters from the different time periods, Macey, Thomas, and Tom, are all in some sense the same person, or, to be more precise, they share a mutual indwelling. This is signaled by the fact that they share the same name (Macey being a diminutive form of Thomas), and that they each suffer from epileptic fits, during which they see visions of events from the others' lives. The complexity of the connections across time prevents the reader from initially seeing the whole picture, just as the characters fail to see their connections with each other. Each rereading of *Red Shift* unveils further connections and makes the story more whole. The mutual indwelling of the three main characters, combined with their "inner time" visions, leads Neil Philip to posit that "[o]ne of the main concerns of *Red Shift* is to identify and define the sacramental. It does not refer directly to mythology, but instead seeks the central quality of myth, the quality of sacredness . . . Through the motif of the male characters' shared fits he considers the nature of godhead, and the possibility that man can not only approach but partake of the divine."[65]

Needless to say, the mutual indwelling of the three characters is, in itself, highly suggestive of the Trinity. Interestingly, this Trinitarian formulation is mirrored by that of the characters' female partners. In each case, the female is the stronger partner who has to remain strong and look after her partner when he has a seizure (hence Garner's otherwise inexplicable claim that *Red Shift* is modelled on the "Tam Lin" ballad). Again, this represents the triple goddess figure depicted in *Gomrath*. Regarding their relationship to the axe head, Neil Philip writes, "it is 'the moon's axe', and once again the moon and instinctive magic are identified with the female principle . . . [The three female characters] are further representations of the White Goddess, the instinctive female who is at once terrifying and alluring, confusing and comforting."[66] In the earliest story, the female character is recognized as an embodiment of the corn goddess, and she in turn recognizes that when Macey has a seizure, "Then the god is in you."[67] By the time of the modern story, the recognition of the numinous has receded from the social space, so that its emergence is only possible as a personal feeling, or as some sort of illness. For Tom, his instinctive sense of the numinous

is expressed through the startling revelations of astronomy, which lead him to feel existentially insignificant and lost.

In the earlier books, there was a notion of an alternative reality which co-existed with, or intruded upon, our world. In *The Owl Service*, the power of a primal action, a mythic event, generates a certain type of charge which, in a sense, lives in the landscape until it can be earthed into the correct human vessels. With *Red Shift*, even the notion of the mythical has gone, to be refined and transmuted into a sense of the sacred that inheres in the landscape and is brought into conscious apprehension by man's living and dying in that greater context. The characters from the different time periods have no awareness of each other's existence even though they share some experiences and perceptions. And their understanding of the sacred differs radically from one to the other. There is no overriding sense of a coherent and transcendent metaphysical truth that the characters are able in some way to access. Instead, there is a sense of the *genius loci* which itself is generated through human dwelling, and which presents itself to those in whom it indwells in radically different ways. There is transcendence here, but it is not transcendence to another, objective, world; it is transcendence through the sacrament of living and dying in a particular place, of creating meaning through the mystery of existence, and thereby sustaining and invigorating the spirit of that place, beyond human ken.

The more subtle depiction of the sacred in *Red Shift* is partly effected through the narrative stratification into three strands. If the story of *The Owl Service* was complicated, then *Red Shift* is complicated in a different way. Each of the three stories is relatively straightforward, but it is not immediately clear why or how the three stories relate to each other. This, combined with the ever-increasing depth and sophistication of Garner's prose, makes *Red Shift* an unusual and intensely poetic novel. Indeed, it has been described as "a very long poem."[68] This poetic quality to the book is intimately allied with a feeling of emotional intensity that is wholly plausible. Tom and Jan share a great deal of tenderness, but the undercurrent of violent hurt that finally explodes feels as though it was implicit in all that preceded it. Similarly, the earlier stories contain a great deal of violence, but we never become desensitized to it because the characters are drawn with such sensitivity. And it is this unflinching mixture of common tenderness and casual violence that helps to elevate this book to the status of poetry. Garner recognizes the primacy of emotional engagement and thereby illuminates the eternal through the prism of the particular.

After *Red Shift*, Garner published four short novellas that were later published as a single volume with the title *The Stone Book*. All four stories center on

craftsmen and their work, specifically Garner's own family of stone masons and blacksmiths in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The narrative is again deeply poetic, and the dialogue employs a diction and register perfect to its setting. All of the men in the stories are masters of their chosen craft, and this is demonstrated with some literary precision. But they are also masters of their surroundings in more subtle, pregnant ways. Their craftsmanship is expressed in all that they do, all that they are. Theirs is a true vocation, a way of being and working that grants to man an alchemical power over the Earth's materials. There is no sentimentalism or mawkishness here. These are all strong, forthright men, men who are concerned with making, building, and creating. Any sense of artistry or spirituality that they might feel is expressed through the precision and utility of their work. But their craft is not mere utility; they are not manual laborers, as we would understand the term now.

In *The Aimer Gate*, the third book of the volume, a young boy climbs the platforms inside the chapel tower, used by his father for maintenance of the chapel clock. He decides to climb higher than he has ever gone before, to the capstone of the steeple. On the upper face of the capstone he is able to trace writing with his finger, and he discovers his own name carved into the stone. The name was carved by his stone mason grandfather, whose name the boy has inherited. But there is a significance to the fact that he chose to carve his name where it would not be seen:

> In the dark his hands could read. And in the dark his hands could hear. There was a long sound in the stone. It was no sound unless Robert heard it, and meant nothing unless he gave it meaning. His chosen place had chosen him. Its end was the beginning.
>
> Robert went down, slowly. He was gentle with the hatch. Father had the clock open and was oiling it.
>
> "That's put a quietness on you," he said.
>
> "Ay."
>
> "What is it most?" said Father.
>
> "He knew it wouldn't be seen," said Robert. "But he did it good as any."
>
> "Ay," said Father.[69]

The pride of a craftsman is not hubristic but simply adequate to the job. If the work is done well then it will endure, and there is no need for exhibitionistic displays of artistry. The nature of a vocation is that the real self is given external expression through the learning of its particular calling. And a key to understanding Garner's writing comes from the common source of the words

“vocabulary” and “vocation” in the Latin *vocare*, “to call.” The sense that craftsmanship is an external manifestation of an inner dignity is implicit throughout *The Stone Book* quartet. And the handing down of these skills through an almost ritualized apprenticeship is one way that continuity is established between the various stories.

Another significant strand of continuity between the books comes from the enduring landscape. A perfect example of Garner’s idea of landscape comes from the opening of the second book, *Granny Reardun*, where a family is being evicted from their house so that its stones can be reused to make a kitchen garden for the Rector’s wife. By the time of the third book, the dismantled house has become a pile of stones covered with grass, and now used only as road flints. And by the fourth book, it is no more than a hump in the ground that provides an exciting obstacle for children sledging. The house that used to be there is no longer a part of living memory, and Garner is careful not to allude to the history, but the residue of human habitation still exists as a mute fact. The exact nature of human habitation changes over time and is lost to memory, but something still endures despite this. Even though we do not know the names of the stone masons who built many of our old churches, their craftsmanship was an expression of who they are, and so an aspect of them endures even anonymously.

When man feels himself to be a natural part of his landscape, he is able to create freely and consummately, and he creates artifacts rather than artifice. Garner sees the totemic aspect of these artifacts and depicts with great skill the numinous source of their creation in the synergy between man and his environment. And this numinous quality is at the heart of Garner’s work: a realization that men and women who inhabit a particular piece of land do, in a sense, co-exist with each other regardless of whether they happen to be living at the same time. An authentic, natural, living and working in a particular place creates a numinous reciprocal link between man and place that, whilst it may not be noticed, nevertheless endures. There is here a sense of mutual indwelling in the land, and in the man-made artifacts mined from the land; a perichoretic intersection that erases the illusion of time through the sanctity of land and work. That which is bequeathed slips from memory, but nonetheless endures as a bequest.

Garner’s next novel, *Strandloper*, was twelve years in the writing and builds still further on the deeply poetic and mystical style developed in *The Stone Book* quartet. *Strandloper* tells the story of a young Cheshire man, William Buckley, who, in 1803, was arrested and deported to Australia. Upon arrival, after a six-month sea journey, he escapes from the penal camp. He believes that if he walks north he will come to China, where he will need to turn left and walk home. For

a year or so, Buckley walks through the Australian wilderness, starved, burned, and hallucinating, thinking that he is on his way home to his betrothed, Esther. Eventually, he can walk no more and, after crawling for as far as he can, he comes to rest on a grave mound, almost dead. There, he is found by an aboriginal tribe who believe that he is Murrangurk come back to life from his grave. The aborigines believe that in death, the body becomes white and, as they had never seen a White man before, their identification of Buckley as Murrangurk makes sense. They nurse him back to health, and he becomes one of them, living with them for 32 years. Ultimately, he intervenes in a dispute between his tribe and some newly-arrived British settlers. They arrange for him to be taken back home to Cheshire.

The story of William Buckley, remarkably, is a true one, and Garner sticks to the facts that are known about him, whilst elaborating on much of the mythic and metaphysical potential of the story. He states in a prefatory note, “Much of what follows did happen; but I have been free with historical detail, in order to make clear the pattern.”[70] In making clear the pattern, Garner delivers an incredible book that is difficult and lucid by turns, and which illuminates the Dreamtime spirituality of pre-modern peoples.

Whilst Buckley is living in Cheshire, his identification with Murrangurk is prefigured through intermittent hallucinations that grant him visions of the glyphs that are sacred to the aborigines, and which he will later come to understand firsthand:

> The timbers of the barn, wall and roof glowed and shimmered with rainbow patterns: lines, curved and crooked; dots, spots and twisted circles; some like the shapes he saw in his head when the pain was bad, but not all; and every one was on the timber, and on only the timber, leaving no space. The wood was carved with light.[71]

When he is discovered by the aborigines, it emerges that one of them has dreamed of Murrangurk in the land of the dead. His dream appears to correspond to a strange fertility rite Buckley underwent when he was back in Cheshire, and which was the cause of his arrest. Interestingly, Buckley is “blacked-up” for the performance of the rite, as though he is physically identified with Murrangurk. When the authorities arrive, Buckley tries to resist arrest, and he begins to speak in tongues. It later transpires that the strange words he utters belong to the language of Murrangurk’s tribe. This all happens in a church which is built on a burial mound. When Buckley is found by the aborigines, he is lying on a grave mound. It is as though the spirit of Murrangurk is able to enter Buckley through

such sepulchers as he returns from the land of the dead. This transference of consciousness and mixing of different religious traditions can be understood with reference to Garner's idea of inner time, where everything exists at once, and which he identifies with the Dreamtime.

Garner is concerned with the continuity of mythic traditions, despite their apparent differences. This is one reason why he senses the sanctity of certain churches, particularly when they are built on ancient burial mounds. At one point in *Red Shift*, Macey has a seizure and hallucinates the church at Barthomley that would not be built until centuries later. The church will be built on a burial mound that is important to Macey, and the church itself will become important, in radically different ways, to Thomas and Tom later on. It is as though the numinous power of such sites is able to transcend the changes of religion and culture that happen over time. By using the suggestion of a perichoretic indwelling of consciousness, Garner depicts a deeper and more metaphysically satisfying picture than most novelists are able to achieve, as he is able to acknowledge the individuality of his characters whilst revealing a more profound unity of being that usually remains hidden. Each individual has a step in the dance, but the deeper truth is that we are all part of the same dance. As Murrangurk says, "There is a mist; but the Dance is not ended, and a song will be sung."[72]

Garner's most recent work, 2003's *Thursbitch*, is stylistically similar to *Strandloper*, employing a combination of understated, yet evocative, narrative and authentically wrought dialogue. Also, like *Strandloper*, it eludes easy interpretation and has been described by one reviewer as "a journey too far."[73] The same reviewer notes that, "'Reader-unfriendly' doesn't begin to convey the challenges of *Thursbitch*. As in *Red Shift*, what is presented as banter between the characters reads more like the interior monologue of a schizophrenic hermit . . . Characterisation is deliberately thin, to emphasize the superiority of ancient landscape to the ant-like humans who crawl across it . . . Increasingly determined to avoid 'overwriting', he declines to describe anything in detail." Whist there is a small kernel of truth to this, the underlying fallacy is revealed in the reviewer's concluding remarks:

> Yet I wonder if *Thursbitch*, for all its uncompromising oddness, can hope to affect an adult reader as deeply as *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* or *Elidor* can affect a child . . . And in a juvenile publishing scene currently dominated by the comfy nostalgia of Harry Potter, the amiable wisecrackery of Terry Pratchett, and movie tie-ins that might as well be sold

> in McDonald's, the kind of books that Garner once saw fit to write—disturbing, mind-expanding but still highly readable—are all too rare.

It is unnecessary to labor the point that Garner can hardly be criticized for trying to write books that do not conform to the expectations of a critic; but it is equally true that, as mentioned earlier, *Thursbitch* could easily baffle fans of Garner's earlier fiction.

Thursbitch is mostly set in the eighteenth century, but the narrative also intersects with a contemporary story. Garner was inspired to write *Thursbitch* by the discovery of an overgrown memorial stone in the 1950s. Its inscription read, "Here John Turner was cast away in a heavy snowstorm in the night in or about the year 1755. The print of a woman's shoe was found by his side in the snow where he lay dead."[74] From this, Garner creates a story of elemental power focused on the eerie valley of Thursbitch. The name is Old English and can be translated as "valley of the demon," although, significantly, *þyrs* may also refer to the fly agaric mushroom.[75] In the eighteenth century, the valley was the locus of a cult of bull worship facilitated by the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms. The remoteness of the location had made it possible for both Christianity and land enclosure to be resisted, although both begin to encroach as the story progresses.

Jack Turner is a travelling merchant who brings exotic materials, such as silk, to the valley. He is also the "priest" of the bull cult, and the local medicine man. During a communal ritual he delivers a pagan Eucharist to the local people, consisting of corbel bread (fly agaric) and a hallucinogenic bilberry wine. Thus intoxicated, Jack invokes the sacred bull which is sacrificed by the congregation. After the ritual, it becomes apparent that Jack had invoked the bull into his own hallucinatory consciousness, as he has been badly beaten up by the intoxicated participants in the rite. The bull, and the associated paraphernalia of the cult, such as the sacred well, standing stones, and a vulval cave, all emerge as natural forces crafted by the numinous power of Thursbitch. In fact, the phrase "sentient landscape" is one that practically all reviewers of *Thursbitch* have picked up on. Although these hallucinations are clearly caused by the ingestion of mushrooms, this does not diminish the power of the images, and, typically, Garner is ambiguous concerning whether all of the episodes are entirely hallucinations.

Interspersed with this eighteenth-century story is a twenty-first century story involving Ian and Sal. Ian is a doctor and priest (somewhat like Jack Turner), and Sal is a geologist suffering from the later stages of a motor-neurone disease, most likely Huntington's. After visiting Thursbitch on a walking trip, Sal begins

to develop an obsession with the place. Initially fueled by her interest in its geology, Sal's attention becomes increasingly focused on the spirit of the place; a spirit she comes to sense as sentient:

> "You get places," she said. "Usually it's no big deal. This is."
> "I'm not with you."
> "It knows we're here."
> "Sorry?"
> "And we are being watched."
> "Where?"
> "In that outcrop."
> He lifted his binoculars. "No one. Look."
> "Pointless," she said. "I'm fingers and thumbs. But it does know."[76]

This sense of being watched, or of a half-seen presence, or distant voices, recurs in both story arcs. The implication clearly is that the characters are obliquely stepping into each other's reality. The power of Thursbitch is such that "place" becomes a partial mediator across time, to the extent that time loses its distance. Indeed, Garner has said of the writing of *Thursbitch*, "it was as if I was simultaneously walking on both sides of a Möbius strip, and I kept coming round to the same place but in another time. I realised I was wrong to think of linear time."[77] The sense of a perichoretic interpenetration of characters in *Thursbitch* is not overdone; it is suggested casually, almost subliminally. Instead, there is a pronounced sense of being consumed by the power of the place itself. In Jack's case, this occurs through his hallucinogenic encounters with the totem spirits of the place; for Sal, it is a more instinctive, but no less important, immersion in Thursbitch's numinous aura. For both characters, Thursbitch becomes a spiritual clearing, aligned with cosmic forces, where the accumulated energies of forgotten aeons find expression.

Ultimately, both characters give their lives to Thursbitch. Jack gives himself in an act of cosmic harmony, attempting to rectify the precession of the equinoxes:

> We have a job to do tonight. We have and all. We must put the stars and moon to rights. How's that, you say? Well, times have been a terrible rough auction of late, have they not? I recollect 'em all, the good wi' the bad, and every word true. The reason is, the sky's slippy; and every so often yon moon and stars get out of sorts, and it's given to folks same as us to fettle 'em and put 'em back on their high stones.[78]

When Sal’s disease becomes too much too bear, Ian altruistically helps her to euthanize. She chooses to be left in Thursbitch overnight to die from hypothermia. As each character dies, simultaneously yet centuries apart, alone yet together, they are immersed into an ultimate indwelling with stone, earth, and stars, and the dance continues forever.

Garner’s central preoccupations have not changed much over time, even if the form of their expression has. From the relatively juvenile adventures of Colin and Susan in *Weirdstone* to the sublime unification of self and land that concludes *Thursbitch*, Garner has always been fascinated by the magical potency of the land. His books pay homage to this power by demonstrating the connection between our human activities and the older, slower, spirit of the land. We are connected to the land through the sanctification conferred by habitation. And we immerse ourselves in its spirit by transforming its materials into objects of worship and sustenance; by the sense of awe that it can inspire; and by the fact that we all ultimately return to the land when our time has ended.

Garner’s progress as a writer is interesting because his vision has achieved greater depth and sublimity without losing its initial focus. Even when his characters are disillusioned and disconnected, like Tom in *Red Shift*, they are shown to have a deep connection to their environment and their past. That they are often unaware of this is a tragedy, and the fact that they might only experience a sense of perichoretic ingress through illness says much; not just about Garner’s own experiences with serious illness as a child, but also about a deeper malaise in Western culture, for Garner’s vision, although universal, is particularly urgent for Westerners living at the present time. He helps us to see a higher unity behind mundane reality, not by invoking strange and exotic traditions from other times and other places, but by immersion in the here and now. The sacred is always present. And through his perichoretic dwelling with voices from the past, with those who have crossed the border, he shows that our individual life is but one step in the dance; and that the dance has not ended.

God Has Become Cancer:

Damien Hirst, Religion, & Death

For the radical Right, the issue of contemporary art is something of a non-starter. The past century or so of developments in the fine arts have been dominated by American (and often Jewish) theoreticians who have fashioned a sensibility wherein anything that smacks of European tradition is automatically *verboten*, unless it can be refracted through a distorting lens of ironic detachment or disinheritance.

Given this, the attitude of nationalist commentators is to dismiss contemporary art out of hand and to long for a return to a more representational art. One of the best statements of this position is provided by Lasha Darkmoon.[79]

While this is certainly a coherent position, and one that accords well with the observations of the common man, it is lacking in visionary ambition. What I mean by this is that the desire to return to something resembling Renaissance art is a limited and parochial view of art history. The sort of art produced from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards was visually determined by the discovery of perspective in the early fifteenth. It is certainly true that this art represents some of the jewels in the Western crown, but it is not really Traditional art at all.

Traditional Art

In Traditional art, symbolism and meaning take precedence over naturalism. The use of perspective in art tends to elevate naturalism above meaning, or at least it greases the tracks of this decline. Furthermore, perspective puts the observer of the work into the position of ultimate authority. David Hockney wittily referred to some of his landscape works as figurative paintings because the viewer becomes a figure in the landscape. He was right, and perspective in art inevitably tends to privilege the position of the observer as a special locus of interpretation.

In this sense, even Renaissance art and its successors foreshadow the assumptions of post-structuralism and deconstructionism: that there are no pre-existing hierarchical arrangements in the world, merely socially organized ones, and that the work of art has no objective existence, but is merely subject to fresh interrogation by each individual who encounters it. If you hate Tracy Emin,

blame Brunelleschi.

A more radical response to the shallowness of contemporary art would be to advocate for a return to pre-Renaissance art forms, to iconography, illuminated manuscripts, and the like.

But the obvious flaw in such a return would be that those preceding art worlds came from a very different time and place to where we are today. In Traditional societies, there was no clear sense of demarcation between art and craft, or between art and religion. The creation of an artwork would have been an act of worship in itself. Perhaps the closest we have to such art today might be the creations of someone like Andy Goldsworthy, but even here the value of the art arises from the aesthetic and spiritual talents of the individual artist.

We do not live in a time when collective worship through shared iconography is a possibility. To long for a return to either Renaissance or pre-Renaissance art forms is misguided, because the social conditions that gave rise to those art forms no longer exist. Art that tries to return to those forms will produce surface imitations that may be aesthetically pleasing but will fail to achieve the same sense of numinous expression, because they will only communicate from individual to individual rather than arising from the shared experiences of a particular community.

So, at one level, the artistic revolution of the twentieth century was entirely healthy and necessary. The Post-Impressionists and their successors recognized that the Pre-Raphaelites' hopes had not been realized and that the world was plunging headlong into modernity. The artwork of the twentieth century reflects the breakdown and fragmentation suffered by the individual, and posits fresh ways for the individual to come to terms with this sense of disintegration. But this is not sufficient; there needs to be a reintegration. Where contemporary art has been useful is as an antenna, receiving and transmitting the metaphysical chaos of a secular age. But it has failed to articulate anything resembling a genuine European ethos appropriate for modernity and post-modernity. Early attempts such as Futurism and Vorticism were rendered stillborn after 1945. (After 1945 there can be no European art, perhaps?)

Given this rather depressing situation, it seems to me reasonable to investigate some of the more meaningful occurrences in contemporary art and to ask whether there might be some latent residue of a Traditional perspective lurking beneath the often tawdry surface. My motivation here is backed up by a suspicion that post-modernism will inevitably undo itself; that, in a world where all values must be equalized, there is always the chance that values detrimental to the present system orthodoxy will be able to smuggle themselves into the Academy and into popular consciousness. And it is with these considerations in

mind that I turn to the work of Damien Hirst.

Conceptual Art

Hirst's primary medium is conceptualism, and he is probably the most famous and successful conceptual artist ever. The narrative of conceptual art tells us that when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal in 1917, this allowed the art object to attain a degree of ontological autonomy that had never before been thought possible. Instead of art creating a representational or symbolic picture of the world, it now became possible for actual elements of the real world to enter into the field of art appreciation, thus challenging the hierarchy of aesthetic value judgement.

The point of such conceptualism is essentially twofold. Firstly, it asserts that the process of selection that had previously been a necessary prerequisite to the production of an artwork is redundant. The accepted symbolism and subject matter of Western art, so the argument goes, are part of a wider matrix of ideological oppression that seeks to assert a regressive sense of order and hierarchy, and to validate such notions. The task of the artist, then, is to undermine such systems of oppression by undermining the symbolic structures of Western discourse. So, a urinal becomes sculpture, as does the artist's own shit as it sells for its weight in gold. A false alchemy of commercial and conceptual praxis replaces Western metaphysics.

Secondly, the locus of meaning retreats a step back in the process of artistic production. Whereas it had always been axiomatic in earlier times that the conceptualizing of the artwork is the prior stage to its execution in a particular craft context, it now becomes possible to formulate a particular concept in the mind and then present it in a more or less unadorned fashion. The "artistry" involved in the process has become less important as the artist's own conceptualization of the object has become foregrounded.

The effect of this is that contemporary conceptual art *en masse* is badly formulated and badly executed. In theoretical terms it fails to achieve an objective correlative in two ways. First, the subject matter of the artwork is badly chosen; it is precisely that which should be excluded from the artwork, or at least be subordinated to other dominant functions of the work. Second, there is no clear objective manifestation of that which is to be expressed. The signification of the work is not contained within itself but points back to the anterior formulation that inspired it; it points to the mind of the artist.

For many observers, these considerations alone are sufficient to condemn conceptual art entirely. The common sense view, that an unmade bed or a pile of bricks cannot possibly be considered genuine art, has a great deal of merit. But it

cannot be denied that art praxis and theory during the twentieth century developed a unique and telling language, a language that has become culturally dominant. For most of today's critics who set the agenda for contemporary art, representational art has been superseded by photography, film, and television, and the only practicing artists worthy of note are those who work with some form of conceptualism.

Hirst's Works

Within this critical milieu, the figure of Damien Hirst looms large. Both an *enfant terrible* and a fêted celebrity, his work is simultaneously central and tangential to the focus of late twentieth and early twenty-first century art appreciation. This dual aspect stems from the nature of the work itself, which achieves a remarkable duplicity of intent: both sincere and removed at the same time. To a large degree, this bipolarity of intention is a reflection of Hirst's core subject matter which consistently revolves around ideas of death; what, if anything, death means to the living, and how we should orientate ourselves towards death now that religion is deemed outmoded. Hirst presents these questions (and occasionally tentative answers) in stark and illuminating ways. The apparent coolness and lack of emotional engagement evident in his work marks it out as a wholly contemporary project, but the obsessive return to this rather metaphysical subject matter suggests that Hirst is less of a modern than he would necessarily admit.

Hirst's early work consisted of Jeff Koons-style conceptual objects and are of little note. The turning point came at the beginning of the 1990s with *A Thousand Years* (1990), and was followed with some of his signature works, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), and *Away from the Flock* (1994).

A Thousand Years presents a cow's head in a glass cube on which maggots feast, and from which they emerge as flies only to find that the cube also contains an insect-o-cutor which ends their brief lives. This is an artwork that attempts to present the entire life cycle, but in a repellent way. Blood from the severed head pools on the floor as do the increasing number of dead flies. Watching this piece is a depressing and somewhat repugnant experience, but it does exert a grim fascination nonetheless. In its attempt to exhibit death as a stark fact, it represents the beginning of Hirst's mature style.

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living and *Away from the Flock* are representative of the work that Hirst is best known for, namely dead animals floating in formaldehyde. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, or *Dead Shark* as it is often known, is a

huge triptych of steel-framed glass cubes, within which a dead shark floats, its fearsome jaw forever agape in a static parody of its former ferocity.

Away from the Flock consists of a dead lamb in formaldehyde, its title pointing towards religious symbolism. The lamb might have a personal resonance for Hirst, who is a former Catholic. It is also suggestive of pastoral art, but problematically so.

With all of these works, we are invited to view death behind glass. Glass works to reveal what is behind it, but it also acts as a barrier, and in this respect Hirst shares some of Francis Bacon's ambivalence towards the art object. The framing device simultaneously acts as a window on the object, thus revealing it as though without mediation, and it also works to delineate the art object as a special category requiring a predisposed form of observation. Furthermore, considering the way in which Hirst frames his dead creatures so as to present a cold, taxonomic portrait of mortality, is it overstating things to suggest that these works were a sort of proto-critique of Internet culture, wherein all of life is presented vicariously and pseudo-objectively on a screen?

Also of interest is a series of display cabinet works. One series of these works is the medicine cabinets, which are literally medicine cabinets filled with packs and bottles of pharmaceuticals. These works hint at the medicalized approach to life that has eclipsed the religious. Hirst presents these drugs as though they were icons, and the clinical appearance of the medicine cabinets reminds us that an age of reason provides clarity rather than faith. But the exchange is problematic. Whereas religion offered the certainty of immortality, medicine now offers the possibility of increased longevity; a humbling trade-off. We believe in these drugs as a new form of Eucharistic sacrament and we swallow them whole, hoping that they will defer our meeting with our maker. As Hirst puts it, "in the world today everybody dies of cancer, if you avoid all the potholes that life throws up. And in a way God has become cancer or it starts to feel like that. . . . If God is to be found anywhere today why not there?"[80]

Another strand of the display cabinet pieces variously features shells, fish, diamonds, and cigarette butts. All in different ways point towards death, but also suggest more of the museum curator approach rather than that of the fine artist, and Hirst has noted that he would prefer art galleries to be more like the Natural History Museum.[81] With these pieces there is a sense of the Victorian collector, of the self-confident taxonomist, who can discover the pre-existing order in the world; who can map out God's plan.

Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding consists of a pair of display cabinets featuring an array of fish

species. In the one cabinet the fish swim left, in the other, right. The only things that distinguish this work from an actual natural history display are the title and the fact that the fish are facing in different directions, which invites some degree of interpretation. The fish can't make up their minds whether they are objective scientific artifacts or higher-level artistic creations, so they swim in both directions at the same time, like Hirst.

These works potentially violate one of the laws of conceptualism: that reality does not consist of pre-existing categories of value and hierarchy. Hirst seems to enjoy the sense of taxonomy in these works rather than trying to subvert it.

More recently, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Hirst executed a series of biopsy paintings. Each was a large scale work based on medical photographs of diseased cells. Each piece was titled after the original photograph's digital name, again combining his obsessions with classification and death.

The pieces are enlarged to a huge size so that the individual cells become monstrously large. Yet, at the same time, the bright coloration of these microscopic images gives them a vivid appeal, creating a sense of a psychedelic interior cosmos. When viewed closely, the pictures reveal razor blades, hooks, and other objects which have been attached to the high-resolution images. It is as though Hirst is captivated by the power of medical imaging to capture these extraordinary images of disease, but he cannot allow the neutral gaze of the scientist to be dominant. The addition of various blades and other loaded imagery channels the viewer's interpretation so that the aesthetically pleasant pictures are ruptured with a violent realization of their malignant intent; but more importantly, we are compelled to notice the metaphysical twist that the artist has added to these artifacts of the physical sciences. The omniscient eye of medicine is able to chart our bodies down to the cellular level, and with this information, forestall death. But it cannot defer death forever, and because death remains an inevitability, it remains for Hirst-as-artist-as-priest to provide a stark exegesis of the terminal condition.

Beyond Postmodernism: Hirst as Metaphysical Artist

It is this attempt to smuggle metaphysical ideas into the discourse of postmodernism that marks Hirst's work as significant and that distinguishes him from most of his contemporaries. It is a radical strategy for two reasons.

Firstly, because postmodernism does not allow for sincere, authentic expressions of feeling but instead insists upon a screen of irony or cynical detachment through which experience must be filtered, the presentation of ideas concerning death and its meaning disrupts the ruthlessly curated scope of

contemporary discussion and posits an emotionally resonant subject matter at the heart of the work.

Secondly, the ontological status of the art object had previously been leveled by conceptualism in order to erase the hierarchical nature of Western culture. By utilizing the art object to evoke a contemplation of death, Hirst necessarily (even if perhaps inadvertently) points to an ultimate boundary, a locus of fundamental meaning. This reintroduces the concepts of hierarchy and value into contemporary art. Thus Hirst's *oeuvre* has the effect of bringing sincerity and hierarchy back into the Western art tradition, whether or not this is his actual intention.

This aspect of Hirst's work has been noted and is a cause for deep suspicion by some critics, particularly American ones who seek to uphold the theoretical foundations of conceptualism. According to this analysis, Hirst's work suffers from the allures of populism so that it conspires with a pre-existing system of signifiers to elaborate what are seen as mystical gestures. The aim of contemporary art, so the critique goes, is to draw attention to the existence of this network of signifiers and to undermine the hidden ideological assumptions that support it. In this way, the artist can subvert oppressive power structures, even if doing so means the artwork's complicity in its own commodification. This perspective has been articulated by one critic, who writes that Hirst's work "consisted of a diluted variant of 1980s appropriation art. Anglicised and ontologised into aura-laden tableaux that dealt, not with the seriality or sign-value of the commodity, but with the timeless universals of the 'human condition'. The regressive, conservative nature of his art was masked, however, by the coolness and slickness of its presentation, and by his own self-promotion."[82]

In this sense, Hirst's work cannot easily be assimilated by the art world over which he reigns. It is only because the art world is concerned with fashion and celebrity, rather than with meaning, that the implications of Hirst's work are not pursued. Hirst is fully aware of this, stating, "I've said you have to get people listening to you before you can change their minds. . . You've got to become a celebrity before you can undermine it, and take it apart, and show people there's no difference between celebrities and real life."[83] His work is replete with the ambiguity of this position to the point of bi-polarity. If he is, as he suggests, engaging in a Faustian pact with celebrity culture, it is important to note that many of the ideas he brings to the table are frankly archaic in the best possible sense.

Is Damien Hirst a great artist? Before answering this question, it would be

worth remembering Coomaraswamy's potent maxim: "The artist is not a special kind of man, every man is a special kind of artist." Hirst is certainly not a great artist in the sense in which we understand Renaissance art to be great. He is instead a clever taxidermist, one full of ideas and obsessed with death. But this is not a demeaning judgment; he has a clear vision, and he pursues it rigorously. At the present time, it is difficult to see beyond the post-modern assumptions that impel the movement of conceptual art, including the notion that the artist is a special mediator who acts as a secular priest. But Hirst's tableaux do raise the interesting notion that these very assumptions can return to notions of classification, hierarchical order, death, and speculations concerning what might lie beyond it. When all things are rendered possible, it should be unsurprising if reality makes a reappearance.

Nexus of Life:
David Myatt & the Acausal

There are many theories and speculations concerning the life and philosophies of the English esotericist David Myatt. These are often concerned with trying to reconcile his apparently diverse religious and political explorations, and with attempting to discover what he "really" believes, and what his "real" intentions are. What is usually overlooked is that he is responsible for articulating a particular theory of life which is consistent with, and indeed fundamental to, all of his professed and alleged explorations. This theory of life concerns the concept of the acausal.

In what follows we will be assuming, as many others do, that Myatt is responsible for authoring the Order of Nine Angels (ONA) documents attributed to Anton Long. It should be stressed that Myatt has always denied that this is the case. We will, however, continue with this assumption for the sake of convenience. Ultimately, whether the articles considered here were written by a single individual or by more than one individual is not important; what interests us is how an understanding of the nature of the acausal allows us to perceive a consistency of approach behind what are apparently quite distinct, or even contradictory, ways of life.

The Acausal

Myatt starts from the premise that life is distinguished from inert matter by virtue of the fact that it possesses an additional "something."

> All life implies 'ordinary' matter plus an extra "something". Our own human life possesses more of this extra "something" than other life. Thus do we and we alone of all life that we know have 'consciousness', an awareness of our surroundings, and 'the desire to know'.[84]

Life is also distinguished from inert matter because it changes, grows, or evolves. Whilst it is possible to explain how these changes in organisms are provoked by physical or chemical stimuli, the cause of change, or movement, itself requires further explanation. For Myatt, this primary cause lies beyond the causal:

> The cause of movement itself must be a-causal, that is, "beyond the causal". The 'prime mover'—or the being of the cosmos itself, the 'cosmic

> Being'—is thus acausal. Movement, and thus change, are causal. It is the acausal which causes, or drives, the movement of the causal, of ordinary matter. Furthermore, we can say that it is this acausal which is the extra "something" which life possesses. That is, life is a contact, or intermingling, of matter with the acausal—or expressed another way, life is where the acausal continuum is manifest in the causal continuum.[85]

This "acausal continuum" is the cause of change in the "causal continuum," and is thus the ultimate source of life. In addition, the acausal is somehow present in the causal through some form of intersection, or perichoresis. Life can then be defined as matter plus "acausal charge," where acausal charge is understood to be that element in matter, or associated with matter, which derives from, or participates in, the acausal. This acausal charge is what enables life forms to disobey the second law of thermodynamics, that is, life forms do not demonstrate an increase in entropy, but instead demonstrate an increase in order.

> This change toward more order may be said to be 'powered' or caused by the acausal energy of acausal charges. The causal energy changes in organisms, which can be described by ordinary chemical reactions between elements and molecules—that is, in terms of chemical energy—are produced or caused by acausal charges. In effect, such chemical reactions are one of the physical manifestations of acausal charges in the causal continuum. Being 'alive' means ordinary physical matter is re-organized, or changed, in a more ordered way. A living organism possesses the capacity, by virtue of its acausal charges, to create order, to synthesize order from the less ordered physical world. Life implies an increase in order in the causal continuum.[86]

It is this insight, that the acausal is the source of the ability of life forms to produce an increase in order, which lies behind so much of Myatt's quest.

We will now consider how this notion of the acausal has been applied to various ways of life followed by Myatt. These ways of life comprise the ONA, National Socialism, the Numinous Way, and Islam.

Order of Nine Angles

Fundamental to the apprehension of magick, as propounded by the ONA, is the belief that there is more to reality than can be experienced through the five senses. All living beings possess "magickal energies," and the apprehension and manipulation of such energies is one of the aims of magickal training. These

“magickal energies” equate to acausal charge.

> According to the septenary tradition, these “magickal energies” possessed by things and ‘life’ derive from what it is convenient to describe as the acausal—that is, every living entity is a point or region where acausal energies manifest in our causal, phenomenal, universe, the amount and type of this energy being dependent on the type of entity. These acausal energies . . . may be said to derive from a parallel acausal universe which intersects our causal universe at certain places.[87]

By virtue of the fact that life possesses an acausal charge, it is possible for human beings to consciously act as a gateway between the causal and the acausal, and to draw acausal energy from the acausal universe. This energy can then be consciously applied for a variety of purposes. This process requires a structure of symbolism in order to be carried out successfully.

> To draw upon such energies it is usually necessary for the individual to use some form of framework or symbolism, and techniques of external magick use such symbolism to bring both apprehension of the energies and their control. Various systems of symbolism exist—most denoting types of energy by gods, goddesses, spirits or demons.[88]

One aim of the ONA is to aid individuals in drawing acausal energy into the causal, and the use of magickal techniques is one way in which this is achieved. But the outward trappings of magick are always seen for what they really are: an outward form that can be used to presence the acausal. For the ONA, it is crucial to distinguish between these outer forms and the source of energy itself, that is, the acausal.

Another aim of the ONA is to participate in the shaping of a new aeon. The ONA regards aeons in Spenglerian terms as organic entities which come into being, live, change, and die. As such, the evolutionary force which drives aeons comes from the acausal. The ONA propagates a sophisticated system of aeonic magick. This aeonic magick is used to draw down acausal forces which are then directed toward the creation of a new aeon.

> One immediate aim is to presence acausal energies in a particular way so creating a new aeon and then a new, higher, civilization from the energies unleashed . . . The fundamental immediate aim [c. 1990 eh–2020 eh] here is to actively presence the energies of the next aeon and channel these, via

> various nexions, forms, structures, ‘ideas’ and so on, to create the next higher civilization. The former means accessing the acausal [in the simplistic sense ‘returning the Dark Gods’ via various rites] and creating those forms/structures necessary to channel the energies so accessed. This will take several decades.[89]

National Socialism

Myatt has arguably done more for post-war National Socialism than anyone else. His emphasis on the ethical and honorable aspects of National Socialist philosophy enables that philosophy to remain a viable ethos for a small number of people today, and keeps alive the hope that National Socialism might one day be viewed with more objectivity by larger numbers of people. Central to his explication of National Socialism is the notion of honor. Honor is perceived to be a means whereby man can achieve greater order in his life, and contribute towards a further evolution of the species. This evolution is the ultimate purpose of National Socialism.

> For National-Socialism, the meaning, the purpose, of our lives is to further evolution: both our own, and that of our folk. This is so because according to National-Socialism we are not isolated individuals, but rather a nexion—a connexion between the past and the future. We can, by our life and deeds, make a difference: aiding evolution, or not aiding evolution. That is, the perspective of National-Socialism is the perspective of Nature, and the Cosmos beyond, for we are regarded as part of our folk, our folk is part of Nature, and Nature part of the Cosmos.[90]

For Myatt, National Socialism is a means for individuals to experience a perspective beyond their own individual lives. It enables us to gain this higher perspective by promoting a sense of duty to the race, the belief that we are a part of a greater organic being. Ultimately, National Socialism is based on the apprehension that all life is an emanation of the Cosmic Being, and is thus interconnected and numinous. It is the rational understanding of this reality that enables us, through upholding the principles of National Socialism, to presence the numinous, and to progress our evolutionary Destiny.

National Socialism enables us to understand that principles such as honor and duty are civilizing and evolutionary. This is so because putting such principles into practice causes an increase of the acausal in the causal.

> In one sense, our consciousness—our awareness, our rational apprehension

> —may be likened to the awareness of the Cosmic Being, just as honour is regarded as a manifestation, a presencing, in us and our world, of evolution: of those forces which enable us to live in a noble, civilized, way. That is, honour is one way in which the Cosmic Being is incarnate—or can be incarnate—in us, as human beings. In a very simplistic way, the Cosmic Being is an increase in order from random chaos—or, more correctly, an increase of the acausal, a manifestation or manifestations of the acausal in the causal.[91]

Viewed from this perspective, it can be seen that the discipline of National Socialism, that is, the upholding of honor and duty, is a means whereby the acausal can be presenced in the causal.

Islam

In 1998 Myatt converted (or "reverted") to Islam. Whilst this bewildered, and continues to bewilder, many people, it is interesting to consider that, for Myatt, an understanding of the acausal is fundamental to an understanding of Islam.

> In essence, Islam asserts—or more correctly, reveals— that Reality is much more than what we perceive, or may perceive, with our senses. That is, we should conceive of reality as containing both a causal aspect and what we may call an acausal aspect, both of which are parts of The Unity.[92]

According to Myatt's description of Islam, the acausal is equated with Being (in a Heideggerian sense), or Allah.[93]

> The Muslim belief is that there is not only our lower, physical and thus causal Time, but another higher or 'acausal' Time. This acausal Time is the Time of Being itself. This is the metaphysical reality which Heidegger strove to express, albeit obscurely, beginning with his work 'Being and Time', although he studiously avoided using the word 'God' . . . The Muslim view or belief seeks to place and define us, as individuals, in relation to Reality—in relation to Existence, to Being; that is, in relation to Allah and the whole cosmos.[94]

The Cosmic Being of National Socialism and the Allah of Islam are both defined in terms of the acausal.

The purpose of life, for Muslims, is to obey the will of Allah. This submission entails living life as a Muslim, and attempting to be true to one's Muslim nature.

This Muslim nature is the real, inner being of an individual, contrasted with the sensible, outer being. The inner, true, Muslim being is acausal.

> All beings in the physical world are both causal and acausal. That is, they exist in both the causal realm and the acausal realm, and a causal being and an acausal being. Their causal being is their physical existence, their 'outward' appearance or form which can be observed and quantified. Their acausal being is their inner Muslim nature. By apprehending this Muslim nature we can understand and know them as they truly are and thus understand and come to know their Creator, Allah. Thus, from a knowledge of beings we are led to Being—to Allah.[95]

For Muslims, then, to live in submission to the will of Allah is to live in accordance with one's true being. The purpose of life for a Muslim is to seek to obey the will of Allah, and in so doing achieve an immortal existence in the acausal.

> Our purpose is, like other beings, to obey the will of Allah, our Creator—to consciously acknowledge our true Muslim nature. If we do this, and live as Muslims by following the way of Islam, we can transcend after death to those realms which are beyond the phenomenal world with its limited causal time—we can proceed to the realms of acausal being, which Islam accepts as a fundamental reality. If however we choose not to be Muslim—not to obey the will of Allah by not living in an Islamic way—then we will have destroyed our chance to transcend to the acausal realm, the realm of 'Heaven', of Paradise, of an eternal existence.[96]

Therefore, the mortal life of a Muslim is, in a sense, a test, and to pass the test he must dedicate his life to the acausal Islamic apprehension which reveals his true Muslim nature, and prepares him for Paradise (the acausal).

The Numinous Way

The Numinous Way grew from Myatt's exploration of ethical National Socialism, and has much in common with his later exposition of that philosophy. It is distinguished from National Socialism in that it attempts to eschew any abstract concepts, such as "nation," and seeks to avoid any sort of ideology. It could be argued that The Numinous Way is Myatt's purest way of life thus far, in the sense that he attempts to describe how a person, or a small community of people, can best live so as to experience the numinous, and presence the acausal,

directly in their lives, through the faculty of empathy and the upholding of personal honor. Empathy and thus compassion are for The Numinous Way essential to evolution, based as they are on the realization that all of life is a Unity, a network of causal and acausal matrices. The acausal is therefore fundamental to the philosophy of The Numinous Way.

> Thus, The Numinous Way conceives as all life—everything that lives, that exists, in the Cosmos—as connected, as part of The Unity, of which causal and acausal are a part. Being aware of this Unity, of how we are connected, of ourselves as one nexion, is the beginning of understanding the meaning, the purpose, of our own lives.[97]

The apprehension of this Unity brings about the realization that all life is connected, and that all life is, in some sense, the Cosmic Being, or a manifestation of the Cosmic Being. This sense of the immanence of the numinous, of the presence of the Cosmic Being in our own being, and in all life, leads us to perceive that all abstraction is a limiting of life to the merely causal. All abstract concepts are seen as describing causal forms, and are therefore limited in their application to life as a whole, understood as both causal and acausal. It is only through personal honor, not through abstract concepts, that we may develop our faculties of empathy and compassion. These faculties then allow us to develop an apprehension of life in its entirety, both causal and acausal. Thus do we begin to appreciate that we are the Cosmic Being, and that we can assist the further evolution of this Cosmic Being by accessing and presencing acausal energies.

> That is, the Cosmic Being is manifest in us, because we are a nexion. Furthermore, we can aid this Being—contribute to its increase in consciousness, its awareness, its evolution—or we can in some ways harm this Being, for this Being is not perfect, or complete, or omnipotent. It is us—all life, everywhere in the Cosmos—existing, changing, being, evolving. We aid this Being when we access acausal energies through such things as honour, compassion, empathy—and especially when we change ourselves, when we become more self-aware, when we develop our understanding, our own consciousness, our reason, and when, at our causal death, we move-on, into the acausal, bringing with us the acausal energies we have “collected” during our causal existence. We harm this Being—and the evolution of the Cosmos, and the aspects of this Being presenced as individuals, as Nature, as other living-beings—when we contribute to suffering, or cause suffering,

> or do what is unethical and dishonourable, for such things remove acausal energy from us, or distance us from acausal energy.[98]

The purpose of life, according to The Numinous Way, is to presence the acausal in the causal. This is achieved through the practice of personal honor, and through the faculties of empathy and compassion.

> The Numinous Way understands this physical life of ours as a means—never to arise again—whereby "we" can evolve toward the acausal. We can do this by strengthening the acausal within us while we exist in causal Space-Time. This involves us in cultivating honour, compassion and empathy—in using our will to restrain ourselves, to do what is right, honourable, and compassionate. Why do these things do this? Because they do or can presence acausal energies, and so we can access certain acausal energies through them, and so change ourselves, so "evolve" thus acquiring for ourselves more acausal energy.[99]

This will to evolve, and thus to acquire more acausal energy, can be seen to be the fundamental and underlying motivation lying behind all of Myatt's extraordinary explorations.

Conclusion

Each of Myatt's ways of life presents a different means of presencing the acausal and experiencing the numinous. They are all intended to encourage the individual to experience life from a higher perspective, and to discover the authentic self which is both causal and acausal. Each individual is a nexus who is capable of drawing down the acausal and experiencing the numinous. Myatt has shown several ways of achieving this.

THE METAPHYSICS OF DEATH

"Only the dead can know what it means to be dead."

—Ananda Coomaraswamy[100]

Philip Larkin's poem "Aubade" articulates his fear of death in chilling terms. It describes a man who hates his job and gets drunk every night. Then, before dawn, he wakes, and with the gathering light, he fixates on the certainty of his own death and what it will mean for him. Larkin is clear that it means complete cessation of the self, that there is no possibility of an afterlife, and that this absence of the self is the most terrifying thing in the world. He describes his terror of:

the total emptiness forever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

Larkin is contemptuous of those who try to palliate the emptiness of death through a belief in a heaven, or through philosophical arguments that claim death should not be feared. Religion is:

That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade,
Created to pretend we never die.

Stoicism in the face of the certainty of death is an impotent weapon, bringing no comfort:

Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

And this clear-sighted terror of the inevitability of death, and the consequent loss of the self forever, always lurks in the margins of our waking consciousness, "just on the edge of vision." In everyday life it is something that is not openly

considered, and so it can be pushed to one side. Only in moments of quiet lucidity, “when we are caught without/People or drink,” does the full sense of the imminent cessation of our being come into focus. And the breaking light of dawn, which gives the poem its ironic title, provides just such a moment for morbid self-introspection.

“Aubade” is a brilliant and terrifying poem. It expresses perfectly the modern attitude towards death: the belief that the self will end, that religion is a palliative, and that death is to be feared. It does so with a cold and precise use of language and rhyme that seduces the ear and convinces the mind. It is a poem which conveys the terror of “the emptiness forever,” but whose author is not able to believe in anything better. His intellectual integrity prevents him from performing the sleight of mind necessary to believe in an afterlife which modern science has forbidden to us.

As far as the modern attitude towards death goes, there is no such thing as a metaphysics of death. There is only the physical process of the termination of the organism. This, as Larkin correctly points out, is because we no longer believe in religion, and so have abandoned the belief that there resides in the individual an immortal soul that will endure after death. We tend to concur with most scientists that a living organism is a material construct whose sense of self and whose consciousness are phenomena arising from purely material processes. If human consciousness is a merely material construction then it would logically follow that it would disappear with the death of the body. It should then be worth considering whether or not the belief that consciousness emerges from purely material processes is correct.

If the materialist paradigm is correct, and there is no “immortal soul” energizing our being, then it means that it is, in principle, possible to map the entire neurological network so that it could be replicated. As long as the materialist paradigm holds, it will allow for the enormously complicated task of identifying and measuring the neural connections in the brain and reconstructing them. If we, like Larkin, disallow the existence of an eternal spirit, or some such other ethereal essence, then there is nothing in principle that should prevent us from creating an artificial intelligence from which a sense of consciousness could arise. All that is required is that the unique material composition of the brain can be simulated in a computer program and then, as a consequence of the complex interactions of the neural network, consciousness will arise. If consciousness is some sort of illusion produced by material interactions in the brain, then the building of a brain in an artificial intelligence program should give rise to the spontaneous creation of an individual consciousness within a virtual world. Success in this task would demonstrate that it is possible for

consciousness to arise from purely material foundations, without the need to evoke an “immortal soul,” and we would then agree with Larkin that death is “emptiness forever.”

Artificial Intelligence

The attempt to create an intelligent machine has been ongoing since the dawn of the computer age. The belief that consciousness emerges from material processes in the brain leads to the inevitable conclusion that it is therefore, in principle, possible to recreate consciousness outside of the human brain; in a computer, for example. The challenge for researchers working in the field of AI is to identify the exact nature of the neural pathways and their connections, and to replicate them in a computer program.

In the early days of AI research, there was a great deal of optimism about what computers would be able to achieve and how quickly they would be able to do it. One of the leading AI researchers, Marvin Minsky, was the technical consultant for the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the film, the computer HAL 9000 is a fully conscious and self-aware being engaging in conversation with humans, displaying an understated matrix of emotions and an ability to appreciate art. It is made clear in the film that HAL is treated as though he is a fully developed individual. Kubrick was keen to ensure that his rendering of HAL was scientifically plausible. The input of Minsky ensured that the depiction of HAL represented scientifically informed ideas of what computers would be able to become by the turn of the millennium.

What is clear from watching *2001* is that workers in AI in the 1960s regarded the development of intelligent, conscious computers as something that would be achieved imminently. This was because there was an assumption that the barrier to such self-conscious machines was the processing and computational speed of existing computers. It was rightly predicted that processing speed would increase exponentially over the coming decades, and it was therefore assumed that the ability to execute programs capable of replicating the complexity of human thought would follow.

But there was a flaw in this reasoning. A minority of thinkers refused to be drawn into the optimism of the early AI research community. One of the most prominent was Hubert Dreyfus, whose ideas concerning the limitations of computing power were mostly ignored at the time, but have subsequently been proven to be entirely astute. What Dreyfus realized was that the barrier to creating consciousness in a computer was not the deficit in processing power, but the very context of “being” in which a computer existed.

In 1965, Dreyfus was asked to write a paper on the future of AI research for the RAND Corporation. He produced a document called *Alchemy and Artificial*

Intellience which likened the research of contemporary AI researchers to the medieval alchemists' attempts to turn base metals into gold. Dreyfus was convinced that the problems facing AI were not problems of processing power, size of memory capacity, or any other practical difficulties. He claimed that there were fundamental problems in principle with the claim that human intelligence could be reproduced in a digital computer. His paper attempted to show that there are certain capacities that human beings excel in which computers would never be able to master. In making his argument, he described three types of information processing which he claimed were "uniquely human." They were fringe consciousness, essence/accident discrimination, and ambiguity tolerance.

Fringe consciousness is the unconscious awareness that human beings have for wider contextualizing states that exist beyond the area of present attention. For example, in a game of chess, "cues from all over the board, while remaining on the fringes of consciousness, draw attention to certain sectors by making them appear promising, dangerous, or simply worth looking into."[101] We do not make these cues explicit to ourselves, and often may be totally unaware of them, but they form a relevant background to those decisions we explicitly make.

Essence/accident discrimination describes the type of insight that human beings employ to instinctively distinguish which information is relevant and which is to be ignored in any given situation. Again, this process is carried out mostly unconsciously; it is never necessary for us to consider every piece of sensory input in our surroundings in order to decide what is inessential. The inessential is filtered out automatically.

Ambiguity tolerance is the ability that humans have to operate without explicit definitions or rules. This can be illustrated with a consideration of language use. It is perfectly normal for words to have secondary or tertiary meanings. In practice, we determine what sense of a word is being deployed with reference to its context. For example, if we were to say that one runner in a race was "miles ahead" of the others, we would automatically know that the word "mile" is not being used in its primary sense of "a unit of linear measure equal to 1,760 yards," but in its tertiary sense of "a very long way or a very great amount." Even then we have no problem in understanding that "a very long way" might, in this context, refer to as little as two or three yards; amounts which in different contexts would be seen as very small indeed. In other words, we are capable of sufficiently reducing ambiguity to make meanings clear, but without the need to explicitly define how we are doing this.

In a later work, *What Computers Can't Do*, Dreyfus expanded even further on his skepticism regarding AI research. In this work, he identified four

assumptions which he believed were uncritically and often unconsciously being utilized by AI workers to underpin research into AI. Dreyfus believed that the goal of achieving artificial intelligence in a computer could only be achieved if these four assumptions were correct but that, in fact, they were all false. These assumptions were the biological assumption, the psychological assumption, the epistemological assumption, and the ontological assumption.

The biological assumption is based on the fact that neural firings in the brain are “all or nothing” bursts of energy. This observation from neuroscience has been extrapolated to imply that such firings therefore correspond to bits of information in a digital computer, which operate in a binary “all or nothing” manner. In a computer, each bit of information is a discrete unit that has a particular symbolic function. But in the brain, Dreyfus argues, the neural firings that superficially resemble such bits of information are modified and “interpreted” according to many other localized conditions, such as rate of pulsing, frequency of pulsing along particular pathways, and interaction with other neurons. In short, the biology of the brain appears to be more analog than digital in character.

The psychological assumption prompts a somewhat philosophical treatment from Dreyfus. Researchers in AI usually assume that human psychology is a process that operates rather like a computer program, that is, that it is essentially an exercise in information processing. The problem for AI researchers is how to translate the physical properties of the brain into the higher-level intellectual concepts of the mind. As long as the brain is described in terms of its physical behavior, there is no problem; seeing a chair can be described as the presence of light waves on the retina causing a sequence of chemical reactions in the brain, all of which can be described quite precisely. But to speak of really “seeing” a chair, it is necessary to use a different sort of language, language which is more appropriate to the mind than the brain. AI researchers, according to Dreyfus, attempt to bridge this gap by suggesting that there is a level of information processing that occurs in the brain that can organize neuro-chemical bits of information into higher-level concepts. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this is the case; in fact, in the absence of evidence, AI researchers postulate as yet unknown information processing functions of the brain, merely based on the supposed analogy with computers.

The epistemological assumption is concerned with the way in which humans know how to perform particular actions. It describes the belief that all non-arbitrary behavior can be formalized, and therefore can be reproduced. Dreyfus argues that any such formalization of human behavior, which would enable it to be programmed into a computer, would merely result in an *imitation*, rather than

a reproduction, of that behavior. The computer would need to follow discrete stages of processing in order to perform any particular function, and Dreyfus is far from convinced that this is in fact how humans behave in practice. AI researchers assume that behavior must follow certain heuristic steps, and that where someone is unaware of following such steps that they must be being carried out unconsciously. Against this view, Dreyfus argues that human behavior is always rooted in a particular situation and orientated towards certain goals. Because of this, people effortlessly grasp the particular local aspect of any subject under consideration due to their experience in the situation. A computer has to work through all possible interpretations, discard those that are irrelevant, and focus on those that are relevant. Human beings do not follow such procedures due to their being located in a particular existential situation.

The ontological assumption concerns a fundamental problem for AI research. As Dreyfus notes, "the data with which the computer must operate if it is to perceive, speak, and in general behave intelligently, must be discrete, explicit, and determinate; otherwise it will not be the sort of information which can be given to the computer so as to be processed by rule."[102] Because computers must operate in terms of such discrete data, it has become habitual for AI researchers to make the assumption that this data is actually present as an aspect of the world; that we, in fact, perceive the world through such data. *Contra* such researchers, Dreyfus posits that, even where we are able to make explicit our perceptions of certain objects, any such fact is itself contextualized by its particular human situation: "Even a chair is not understandable in terms of any set of facts or 'elements of knowledge.' To recognize an object as a chair, for example, means to understand its relation to other objects and to human beings. This involves a whole context of human activity of which the shape of our body, the institution of furniture, the inevitability of fatigue, constitute only a small part."[103] Moreover, this situation cannot itself be reduced to isolated, context-free facts; it is colored by influences from the preceding situation, so that we build up associations and interpretations over time.

For a computer, this learning-through-time model presents a problem. If data can only be interpreted according to a situation, and if that situation relies for its meaning on the previous situation, then it seems to lead to an infinite regress. At some point, a programmer has to decide what information to give to a computer to begin with, and this will be based on the programmer's own, human, situation; it will not arise naturally from the computer's "consciousness." In humans, this paradox is avoided by the fact that we are, in Dreyfus' words, "wired genetically as babies" to recognize certain stimuli as positive and nurturing, and others as

harmful. This appeal to genetics provides a powerful argument for the unique nature of human consciousness.

The Traditionalist View

According to Traditionalist teachings, the unique, inimitable aspect of the human being corresponds with the Divine. This aspect is mostly obscured by more transient aspects of the self, and in the modern climate it is precisely those ephemeral, shallow characteristics that find greatest resonance in their outer surroundings. Ananda Coomaraswamy writes about the supremacy of the Divine aspect of the self and entreats that it is necessary to experience the death of the personal self, that is, of the transient, passing attributes of one's biography, and to realize the eternal aspect of the self which is identified with God. Thus:

> "I" neither think nor see, but there is Another who alone sees, hears, thinks in me and acts through me; an Essence, Fire, Spirit, or Life that is no more or less "mine" than "yours," but that never itself becomes anyone; a principle that informs and enlivens one body after another, and that which there is no other, that transmigrates from one body to another, one that is never born and never dies, though president at every birth and death.[104]

This "spirit" that animates all beings, yet somehow transcends each, is the part of the self which is seen as being truly authentic. We recognize it throughout religion and folklore. When a child is born his spirit is delivered into him from the heavens, and we say that he has been delivered by a stork. When he dies, he ascends to sit with angels whose wings denote that he has returned to the same airy realm from whence he came. In heathen times, he would have been escorted by similarly-winged Valkyries.

Norse theology provides us with another insight into the way that this spirit partakes of many whilst retaining unity. When Odin sits on his throne, Hliðskjálf, he is said to be able to see everything in the world. He becomes omniscient by virtue of the fact that he is the All-Father, the fundamental generating principle in the world, and as such he is the spirit, or animating force, which expresses its particularities through each of us. He can see through our eyes because, to the extent that we are authentically alive, he *is* us.

Similarly, Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin, are said to leave him in the morning and return in the evening to tell him everything that they have witnessed around the world. The name Hugin means thought, whilst Munin means memory. Again, this attests to the omniscience of Odin. That Hugin and Munin are winged messengers again denotes that it is the realm of the spirit

which is the key to understanding the nature of this transpersonal consciousness.

The omniscient aspect of Odin is retained even today through the attenuated figure of Santa Claus, who is able to see whether children are behaving or not. The importance of omniscience in these tales is not to signify that Odin is a different order of being than us, but to show that the Divine spirit is something which is transmitted through us. Odin is omniscient because he *is* all of us; he is the summation of being. In this sense, then, we can see why Coomaraswamy draws attention to the duality of being:

> Our whole tradition everywhere affirms that "there are two in us"; the Platonic mortal and immortal "souls," Hebrew and Islamic *nefesh* (*nafs*) and *ruah* (*ruh*), Philo's "soul" and "Soul of the soul," Egyptian Pharaoh and his Ka, Chinese Outer and Inner sage, Christian Outer and Inner Man, Psyche and Pneuma, and Vedantic "self" (*ātman*) and "self's Immortal Self" (*asya amrta ātman*, *antaḥ puruṣa*)—one the soul, self, or life that Christ requires us to "hate" and "deny," if we would follow him, and that other soul or self that can be saved.[105]

The Traditionalist view of human individualism, as representing the ephemeral, transient aspect of a deeper and lasting higher self, is quite at odds with the sick ennui expressed by Larkin when contemplating the ultimate loss of the self. For Larkin, everything that can be experienced, all potentialities, are locked up inside the individual consciousness of a human being, and with his death all possibility is destroyed forever. For the Traditionalist worldview, this human consciousness is barely even the tip of the iceberg; in many respects, it is a positive obstruction to the proper apprehension of the authentic self. Hence Coomaraswamy's approval of Meister Eckhart's words, "the soul must put itself to death." From the Traditionalist perspective, Larkin is in error in perceiving the entirety of his self to be contained within his individual personality. His terror of "the total emptiness forever" is the fear of one who has never suspected the presence of an animating life force anterior to the everyday personality. For such an individual, death is indeed a total cessation, as the self is only identified with its transient expression. The aim of Traditionalist teachings is to unveil the profound spirit which transcends the individual consciousness.

A Surprising Ally

In positing this dichotomy between the teachings of Traditionalist metaphysics on the one hand and the contemporary materialist paradigm on the other, it is surprising to note that some support for the Traditionalist view can be found

deeply embedded in the enemy camp.

The most strident exponent of the modern atheistic, materialist paradigm is the neo-Darwinian evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins. In his classic neo-Darwinist text, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins argues that human beings, as well as other evolved organisms, are not the discrete, autonomous entities that they might consider themselves to be. Instead, such bodies are "gene machines," organic vehicles for DNA molecules, whose purpose is to spread and protect the particular genetic sequences which inhabit them. For Dawkins, it is the gene, the unit of chromosomal material involved in evolution, that is really in the driving seat, acting according to the unfathomable dictates of millennia of blind selection. This process of selection, whilst without purpose, must necessarily favor genes which are good at surviving. So much is axiomatic. Those genes which survive well will do so by inhabiting organic material that is capable of providing good protection. Such organic material might range in sophistication from a thin cell wall to a human being.

The importance of Dawkins' insight is in seeing the gene as the basic unit of life, and in understanding that it is the gene, not the organism in which it resides, which is the driving force behind evolutionary development. It might not be stretching it too far to say that, when viewed from this neo-Darwinian perspective, the purpose of life is the continuation of the gene, although Dawkins would not use the word "purpose." It is also worth remembering that the survival of the gene is not a matter of individual genes establishing a line of heredity as organisms do; it is a matter of them perpetuating exact copies of themselves. DNA is a sequence of information which is used to shape and build organic material. Whilst the body it inhabits is born anew in each manifestation of a new generation, the genetic information present within the DNA remains exactly the same. In Dawkins' words:

> [The gene] is no more likely to die when it is a million years old than when it is only a hundred. It leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death. The genes are the immortals . . . We, the individual survival machines in the world, can expect to live a few more decades. But the genes in the world have an expectation of life that must be measured not in decades but in thousands and millions of years.[106]

Whilst Dawkins' detractors often focus on his secular, atheistic concerns, what is remarkable about the selfish gene idea is the way that it seems to support a

Traditionalist view of the self. As Dreyfus pointed out in his objections to AI, the human being is born with certain genetic predispositions which orientate him into seeking certain cues from his environment, such as a mother's nipple. From these simple cues, it follows that the human organism will potentially be able to achieve its primary aim of survival, and then develop into a more sophisticated individuated consciousness. But this individuated consciousness is not replicable in an artificial context, because it requires for its manifestation a prior genetic history of countless millennia of patient evolutionary development. "We are millions of yesterdays," wrote Austin Osman Spare, "and what appears autogenic is the work of unknown mediators who permit, or not, our acts by the *mysterious chemistry of our believing*."[107]

For Coomaraswamy, we are vehicles of the Divine spirit; for Dawkins, we are vehicles of pure information. Consider the similarity between Coomaraswamy's words, "a principle that informs and enlivens one body after another, and that which there is no other, that transmigrates from one body to another, one that is never born and never dies," and Dawkins', "It leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death." It should not be a source of great concern that one writer is considering the incomprehensible vastness of God whilst the other is considering infinitesimally tiny units of information. Both demonstrate the way in which our lives are suffused with an essence which is in us, but is more than us; and both show that we are expressions of something far greater than our egoic selves can truly comprehend. And if Dawkins is the primary atheist of our age, it should be of no consequence; after all, what is God if not the hidden intentions of eternity?

It might be objected that this brief consideration of the metaphysics of death gives no comfort. We will all die, "and soon" as Larkin mordantly reminds us. And for the outer self, the egoic personality, there is no hope: it will perish with the body. But this personality is already an illusion, a conceit of the organism. It is no more the real self than your name is the real you. It must be put to death by the real, immortal self. For anyone who can shift the locus of their being into this immortal self, reunion with the Divine awaits. Only the dead can know what it means to be dead.

Ashes Hollow

Few of those who had made such encouraging noises actually showed up when they scattered Edric's ashes. It was difficult to blame them. His widow had chosen a damp, granite-cold February morning to set his mortal remains free in the valley they had both loved so much. As the grim, black-clad cortege slowly trudged and squelched its way across the campsite, over the footbridge, and alongside the stream that cut through the foot of the valley, some of those few wished that they had come up with excuses of their own.

The beauty of the valley was impossible to deny, but February was doing its best to hide it. A cold mist was concealing the peaks of the surrounding hills so that only the immediate inclines on each side of the stream could be seen at all. The sheep all scattered at the approach of the mourners, all except one whose spinal column protruded from its fur mat, and whose gaping skull lay immobile, gazing blindly forever at the hidden sky. That a dead sheep lay no more than a few feet from the spot where Edric was to be scattered was seen as a bad omen by most of the entourage, many of whom had given up trying to keep shoes and trousers clean, and instead hoped to get this ceremony over with as quickly as possible and retreat forthwith to the Ragleth Inn.

Edric's widow was unperturbed. She and Edric had spent hours happily sitting by this stream, and her vision of the immediate environment owed more to the comforts of nostalgia than to the inhospitable reality of the day. She stood for a moment, bringing to mind some of her favored memories of this place, and of the man she had discovered it with. And then, with a few secret, whispered valedictions, he was gone. There was nothing dramatic about it once it had happened. Like so many little rituals, the drama was all in the minds of the actors, but for Edric's widow it was the fulfilment of a promise, and of Edric's final will. For her, the meaning was not in the moment, but in the acceptance of a reality outside of time; of an eternal persistence of life, whose presence could best be caught in moments of forgetfulness, of forgetting who we are, and in wordless realizations that we may be something other than what we think we are.

She and Edric had talked a lot about such things, and where she had not quite fully understood, he understood for her. And where he had not quite fully believed, she believed for him. And so they had complemented each other, each providing for the other's shortcomings. And in the weeks of his absence, she had needed to believe more strongly in the reality of the other reality, the eternal

order. In her distress at losing him, she found it easy to comfort herself with this belief. But in his absence, she found it increasingly difficult to understand why she believed it. And in the absence of a partial understanding, she developed a perfect belief. This cold February morning was to be the fulfilment and seal of that belief.

She spoke to none of the others about these matters as they filed inelegantly back across the mud and moss to the warmth of the inn, but she seemed to glow with an inner power that comforted her friends. They could see that this morning's ritual held deep meaning for her, even if it lacked the picturesque grandeur that they had been led to believe would accompany it. There was a sense of completion, a feeling of finality in the air.

There was great relief in being back at the inn. Tongues were readily loosened, with men offering to buy everyone drinks, and women fussing over the prepared food. There seemed little to say about the morning's ceremony as its icy grasp was thawed by the crackling log fire in the small pub lounge. This half of the inn had been set aside for the informal wake, with a handwritten notice reading: "Private function, please use other door for bar" stuck to the frosted glass of the door. And so the mourners remained untroubled by the few locals and visiting passersby who came to the pub.

Relatives who had not seen each other since the last funeral caught up with each other's news, and Edric's few friends who had turned up segregated themselves into a closed ring of drinkers and reminiscers. There was an air of awkward cordiality. Some of the relatives struck up conversation with some of the friends, either about the food that was on offer, the location of the scattering, or the nature of their relationship to Edric. Some of the men immediately intuited a resonance with each other and heartily exchanged anecdotes. It was mostly the women who sought to attend to Edric's widow's feelings. They surrounded her with a loose and informal confederation of allies who instinctively knew when to refer to her loss and when to distract her with practicalities. Everyone sensed that her dignified self-overcoming was entirely admirable, and felt glad to have come to this strange ritual; even if they did not understand its significance, the fact of its importance to Edric's widow was undeniable.

Little time passed before protracted and uncomfortable goodbyes were being presented to the widow. Her deportment and mien throughout were flawless; she was noble. As each exiting party left, the lounge became a quieter and more reflective place. The general background noise of chatter disappeared and everyone became more self-conscious, as their words could be heard by everyone else. The women were less affected by this than the men. No one was surprised when Edric's widow escaped to the Ladies' for a few moments.

As she entered the toilet, she was stunned to hear an alien, disembodied voice talking to her. She was already in a sensitive frame of mind, so she felt resigned to this strange experience. The voice was confused, but it spoke of the reality of death and its primacy.

As those moments of her absence grew to long minutes, no one worried. After ten minutes, one of the women discreetly went to see if she was okay. Her confused return to the lounge, trying to stifle her panic with a fear of being accused of overreaction, alerted the mourners to the fact that something was wrong.

When the men broke the toilet door open, they found her seated, fully clothed, on the toilet lid, her hands clasped in her lap, and her face a mask of quiet contentment. Although they were able to stop the blood flow from her wrists, she had already lost too much, and Edric's widow was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

There was little that could profitably be said about the sad events of that January and February, though much actually was said behind closed doors. Edric and his widow had died childless, so there was nothing left to stifle unanswerable questions. Those who had been present at the scattering of Edric's ashes seemed to be most obviously affected by this further tragedy; some even spoke of their feelings to a reporter who subsequently wrote a short piece for the local newspaper. But the effects of Edric's widow's shocking suicide went much further, and much deeper.

Of those who had not, for whatever reason, attended the scattering of Edric's ashes, there was a great deal of confusion and hurt. Many thought that Edric's widow would not have done as she had if only they had been there. These among the bereaved felt a mixture of anger and guilt, and often could not distinguish between the two: if only I had been there, she would still be alive because I would have sensed that something was wrong, so why didn't anyone else spot it? Over time, as the earth thawed and then froze again, the energy that animated such complex emotions dissipated itself.

There were others who were affected by the suicide who did not think that it would have been prevented if they had had an opportunity to intervene. They accepted a much more fatalistic interpretation of those sad events, and believed that there must have been a power that possessed Edric's widow, a force invoked through her grief that had been the real motivation lying behind her actions. They accepted that her suicide was inevitable because they didn't believe that she was truly responsible for it.

Of these fatalists, some few who were of a pre-existing melancholic temperament came to feel that there was, in any case, a degree of inevitability to

suicide. Not that they were drawn to suicide themselves, but they saw that death held such power, such a ubiquitous horror, that it was understandable that some would be overwhelmed by it.

One of those so affected was an old friend of Edric's who had maintained only sporadic contact with him since his marriage, and that mostly conducted through third parties. This friend had suffered in the past from a series of violently terrifying nightmares which usually left him lying awake in the middle of the night, soaked in sweat, and focused quite clearly on the reality of the inevitability of death. Following each nightmare, his fear and morbidity would recede as the Sun rose, so that by the time he started work his only problem was a lingering tiredness; the perception brought about by the nightmare was forgotten.

A few days after Edric's widow had killed herself, this friend was visited by another of his terrifying nightmares. He was quite unprepared for it, as he had not suffered from one for some years previously. In the dream, he was sitting in a bar with the mourners following the scattering of Edric's ashes. In the strange manner of dreams, he was both a detached observer and an intimate confidante of Edric's widow, hearing her innermost thoughts. He watched, and heard, as she stood up from the table and made her way to the Ladies' toilet, thinking to herself about her imminent death. She was consumed with the idea that she would soon be reunited with her husband, inhabiting the same nether universe that Edric was in. He tried to reason with her, to talk her out of her set course. He explained to her that she could not be reunited with Edric because "Edric" no longer existed. There was no Heaven, or any other afterlife for him to go to. He had died and therefore no longer existed. He pleaded with her not to go through with her suicide, as it could only lead to a complete absence of being, and that was the most terrifying thing in the world. She refused to shift her focus from her imminent suicide, and cut her wrists open as she smiled at him. She waited to die, to meet Edric again, but she simply disappeared from view, certainly to nothingness. At this point in the nightmare, he realized that Edric's widow had disappeared completely from existence, and that he, at some point, would also certainly disappear from existence. He was now trapped in the toilet cubicle alone, and he felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness surrounding him. He realized that an eternity of this emptiness, however horrifying, would at least be a form of existence, and when he thought about the reality of the absence of existence, the total annihilation of self, he awoke, breathless and panicked.

As with previous nightmares throughout his life, the Sun expelled the terror and allowed him to continue with his day. When he returned home from work that evening, his wife and daughter were both sitting in the garden, listening to

the radio in the sunshine. He looked at them with overwhelming love and suddenly remembered the feeling in his dream, or rather, the absence of feeling, the absence of everything. He stared at his wife and daughter and started to hear some of the voices from the dream. He wondered how he could reconcile his love for his wife and daughter with the knowledge of their certain deaths. He poured water into a glass and tried to forget about it.

Liber III vel Jugorum & Self-Mutilation

Aleister Crowley's "Liber III vel Jugorum" describes a short and practical ritual intended to promote the control of speech, action, and thought. According to the text of "Liber Jugorum," "Three are the Beasts wherewith thou must plough the Field; the Unicorn, the Horse, and the Ox. And these shalt thou yoke in a triple yoke that is governed by One Whip." The Unicorn represents speech, the horse, action, and the ox, thought. "Liber Jugorum" describes a system of practice whereby the practitioner begins by forbidding a particular word or phrase to himself for a week or more. Each time that he accidentally utters the forbidden word or phrase, he must cut himself on the arm with a razor. This practice is repeated with a specific action or mannerism, and then with a specific thought.

The ritual seeks to bring these areas of habitual behavior under greater conscious control so that one may gain self-mastery. Just as the animals of the field require the yoke around their necks and the whip of the ploughman in order to plough the field, so does the individual require the yoke of discipline and the punishment of the razor to master himself. In the words of "Liber Jugorum," "Thus bind thyself, and thou shalt be for ever free."

The efficacy of "Liber Jugorum" does not seem to be widely accepted. Kenneth Grant criticized it on the basis that it creates inhibition rather than discipline: "It is not a practice I would recommend because the long-term result is not control of thought and speech but, rather, a lessening of spontaneity and a dread of making mistakes. In other words, a substantial guilt-complex is engendered. In any case, why do violence to the body when the fault lies with the mind?"[108] The issue of cutting oneself also seems to be contentious. On many online blogs and forums, it is apparent that "Liber Jugorum" is often practiced with some other form of punishment, rather than cutting, being utilized. A common substitute appears to be an elastic band around the wrist which can be pulled taut and released to snap against the skin.

Cutting and other forms of self-mutilation are highly taboo practices in modern Western cultures, often provoking revulsion and incomprehension. The reasons for carrying out self-mutilative behaviors are varied and complex, but for some cutters there appears to be a desire to assert control over the self in a way which mirrors the stated intention of "Liber Jugorum." Paradoxically, for

many cutters the act of self-harm is experienced as a healing process. In order to understand this phenomenon, it will be necessary to consider self-mutilative practices in a range of different contexts, so that the healing and integrative functions of self-mutilation can be better understood.

On the face of it, it might seem utterly bizarre to suggest that self-mutilative behavior could have some sort of beneficial, healing effect. After all, the self-mutilator is actively seeking to harm herself, often in shocking and appalling ways. How could acts of self-harm simultaneously convey messages of symbolic healing? At the deepest levels of mythology, this paradox appears to be as old as human culture. In the Norse creation myth, the giant Ymir is dismembered, and the world is created from his body parts. In the Indian creation myth, the world is created from the dismembered body parts of Purusa. The idea of the creation of the world from the dismembered body parts of a primordial being is one of the fundamental motifs in many creation myths. It establishes a first act of primal creation based upon mutilation and destruction.

Once the world has been created, the gods then carry out acts of self-mutilation in order to gain spiritual insights and powers. Odin enucleates his eye and casts it into the well of Mimr in order to gain wisdom. Attis castrates himself and is resurrected. Even the sufferings of Christ in His final hours are willingly suffered in order to redeem the world and mankind from their sinful states. Mutilation is a common occurrence in the realm of the gods, and it is often a redemptive or healing act.

Throughout most of the world's cultures, there have been religiously-inclined groups and individuals who have similarly sought to gain wisdom, or spiritual elevation, through the practice of self-mutilation.

Within Islam, a particularly extreme sect are the Hamadsha of Morocco. Their practices are focused upon propitiating a particularly bloody Djinn called Aisha Qandisha. The Hamadsha engage in ritual practices involving drinking boiling water, eating spiked cactus plants, and gashing their heads with knives and axes. They carry out these acts after working themselves up into a frenzied, trance-like state in which they do not experience any pain. In this state they are able to generate a healing force known as *baraka*. The blood from their wounds is smeared on injured or diseased body parts to provide healing, or is soaked into sugar cubes and eaten. Thus, the healing power of the *baraka* is shared out. Some participants in this rite report seeing visions of Aisha Qandisha herself, cutting and slashing her own skin to encourage her devotees to do the same.

The Aché are a tribal grouping in Paraguay. They carry out ritual scarification as a rite of passage at adolescence. This act of ritual cutting appears to be connected to deeper beliefs concerning the cosmic order. The Aché believe that

the cosmos is periodically threatened by a blue jaguar which attempts to devour the Sun and Moon. The jaguar is prevented from doing so by the ritual splitting of the Earth with an axe. This act is seen to impose order on the Earth. The ritual cutting of the adolescents' skin serves a similar function. Through this rite of passage, the youngster is inducted into adult society and is able to take his place in an ordered structure. Just as the act of splitting the Earth fends off the jaguar and protects the Sun and Moon (and thus, cosmic order), so too does the ritual scarification prevent social disorder and promote group identity.

Self-mutilative practice is also a feature of Christian society. According to legend, Saint Lucy was a young woman who had dedicated her life to chastity. When a man fell in love with her, and particularly with her beautiful eyes, she enucleated both eyes and sent them to him on a platter. Lucy was said to have prayed through the night with her mother at the tomb of Saint Agatha to cure her mother's dysentery. During the night, a vision of Agatha appeared to Lucy, and her mother was cured. Agatha was herself the victim of mutilative practice; amongst the tortures she underwent for failing to renounce her faith was the cutting off of her breasts.

The example of the gods and saints is followed today by many people who mutilate themselves in order to follow religious imperatives. In his exhaustive study of self-mutilation, Armando Favazza writes: "By far the most common motive expressed by self-enucleators is the need to adhere to Matthew's biblical injunction that one who has looked lustfully at a woman already has committed adultery in his heart, and he should, therefore, cut out his eye and throw it away to save his entire body from perdition."[109] Favazza estimates that in the United States, about 500 people a year self-enucleate, and this phenomenon is almost entirely linked to Christianity. Despite these cases being associated with mental disorder, it is notable that the act of self-enucleation does seem to have a beneficial effect: "Most psychotic patients report a certain tranquility following self-enucleation, either because they have received the severe punishment they believe they deserve or because they have successfully rid their bodies of an evil spirit."[110] Despite many people mistaking these sorts of practices for mitigated suicide attempts, deviant self-mutilation can often occur as an attempt to prevent suicide. Indeed, it appears to be a common motif of self-mutilation that the sacrifice of a part of the body can succeed in saving the whole.

Elsewhere in Christianity, the mutilated body of Christ is an object of great reverence. The tortured body of Christ is one of the most common themes in Western art, and is a source of deep meditation. The film *The Passion of the Christ* is an excellent modern depiction of the spiritual significance of the

mutilation of Christ's body. Amongst the many traditions of worship centering on Christ's wounds is the practice of the Moravians, who envisaged His side wound, pierced by the spear of Longinus, as a vagina. This accords well with certain psychoanalytic theories of self-mutilation which see cutting as a way of creating small, symbolic vaginas on the skin, which are used as a way of repressing, or otherwise controlling, sexual desires.

In the field of contemporary performance art, the Vienna Actionists utilized actual and symbolic mutilations in their performances. Hermann Nitsch has performed numerous Actions which frequently involve the slaughter and disemboweling of animals, and the pouring and smearing of blood onto participants who are often in a crucifixion pose. His work is concerned with a sort of sensory overload, using music and scents to immerse the viewer in the experience, so that the lines between artist, participant, and viewer become meaningless. One of the primary intentions of his work is to employ sacrifice to provoke an experience of abreaction: "Birth, procreation, death, death on the cross and resurrection are experienced all at the same time. We have within us the anxiety and lust of the murderer, and the mortal fear of the victim. We are the killer and the killed . . . raw, damp, bloody flesh torn apart during the Dionysian excess contrasts with the taste of fruit on the morning of the resurrection."[111]

The ritualized nature of these performances has been widely noted, as have their redemptive and purgative qualities: "Such activities sprang from Nitsch's belief that humankind's aggressive instincts had been repressed and muted through the media. Even the ritual of killing animals, so natural to primitive man, had been removed from modern-day experience. These ritualized acts were a means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering."[112]

Another member of the Actionists, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, dealt explicitly with images of self-mutilation. Indeed, he has been referred to as a "renowned self-mutilator."[113] The few Actions he participated in during his brief career are documented in photographs. In many of these photos, Schwarzkogler's model can be seen wrapped in bandages and surrounded by razor blades, surgical instruments, and dead animals. The scenario is one of a sinister and clinical alienation. The accoutrements of modern medical practice appear as ritual items in some half-suggested self-mutilative rite. Schwarzkogler's Actions appear in contrast to the messy, visceral performances of Nitsch. Conducted and documented in private, Schwarzkogler's Actions betray a need for control, a desire to regain a healthy equilibrium. His attitude to art was fanatical and mystical. Before his death he was pursuing a series of purgative health regimes,

based on fasting, to cleanse and purify his body. In this respect, he would seem to share the anorectic traits of many self-harmers.

Schwarzkogler's art can be seen as a means of articulating a need to reassert control over a social and aesthetic world with which he is out of step. The bandaged body of his Actions can be seen as the mutilated self, attempting to construct a framework of meaningful and healing symbolism through its own fatal language of self-mutilation. It might be relevant to note that many self-mutilators who cut themselves often create their own instinctive ritual procedures associated with their cutting. This may involve the careful setting out of cutting paraphernalia in a particular way, the collection of blood in a vessel, or the drinking of blood.

The disciplined energy of Schwarzkogler's work is attested by the enduring myths that surround him. The art critic Robert Hughes claimed in *Time* magazine that Schwarzkogler had cut off his penis, slice by slice, in one of his Actions, resulting in his death. Whilst entirely untrue, and seemingly an extrapolation from photographs of his model's bandaged penis surrounded by razor blades, the myth is surprisingly well-known, and confirms that Schwarzkolgler was tapping into deep, latent sources of meaning as regards self-mutilation. It is unknown whether Schwarzkogler's eventual suicide, by jumping from his bedroom window, was in some way to be seen as his final Action. Most likely, it represented his inability to finally control the demons of self-mutilation that he had invoked.

Favazza defines self-mutilation as "the deliberate destruction or alteration of one's body tissue without conscious suicidal intent."[114] This definition covers both culturally sanctioned and deviant self-mutilation. The examples of the Hamadsha and the Aché, given above, are both culturally sanctioned behaviors, whilst the self-enucleation of guilt-ridden Christians is deviant. Deviant self-mutilation is associated with some type of mental disorder. Most skin cutters are deviant self-mutilators, and it is perhaps a moot point whether those who follow the ritual of "Liber Jugorum" should be regarded as culturally sanctioned self-mutilators. The main point of difference between deviant cutters and performers of "Liber Jugorum" is likely to be the mental state of the practitioner. The deviant cutter will be suffering from some form of depression, anxiety, or mental disorder; the performer of "Liber Jugorum" need be under no such handicap. But the desired end of such self-mutilation is, in both cases, a regaining of a sense of control over unconscious processes.

For Crowley, the highest purpose of Magick is to attain the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel, and thereby to formulate and follow

one's True Will. Bearing this in mind, the purpose of "Liber Jugorum" is to discipline and control the contingent and inessential aspects of the self so that the higher self, personified by the Holy Guardian Angel, can be allowed to express itself fully.

In an essay examining the Thelemic interpretations of neurology, Robert Taylor equates the cerebrum with Nuit and the cerebellum with Hadit. The cerebrum is associated with waking consciousness and with the ability to override impulsive desires. The cerebellum is associated with dream states and with instinctive urges, such as the libido, and with involuntary, reflex processes. The smaller and, in evolutionary terms, far older cerebellum sits below the cerebrum and "perceives" it as a night sky, arching above, with flashes of neural transmissions "seen" as stars. The integration of these two differing modes of consciousness into a third, and higher, unity is the aim of magical praxis:

> Nuit and Hadit are two fully evolved personae, evolved from the two basic energies of the personality—intellect and libido. Both comprise two universes of experience. They are seen (both physiologically and as portrayed in Liber AL) to be divergent and even contradictory. Yet the real purpose of this divergence is paradoxically that of a fruitful union and cross-fertilization. ['For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union.' AL.I.29.] . . . The whole point of all mystical practices is to unite these seemingly divided types of consciousness, dissolving both their illusory forms to form a third.[115]

From this perspective, "Liber Jugorum" can be seen not only as a means of disciplining and controlling the unconscious mind, but also as a way to bring the hidden and suppressed patterns of thoughts and behavior from the waters of the unconscious to the light of conscious examination. "Liber Jugorum" provides an extreme means for achieving an integration of these two types of consciousness. The waking consciousness of the cerebrum (Nuit) is thus able to communicate with the dark dwarf cerebellum (Hadit).

Amazingly, it appears that deviant self-mutilators achieve a similar outcome through their improvised rituals of self-harm. Many people who practice self-mutilation claim to do so to relieve feelings of stress and anxiety. Often these feelings manifest in a sense of unreality, or depersonalization. By carrying out an act of self-mutilation, a feeling of relief and purgation can occur. An episode of depersonalization, where the individual is assailed by uncontrollable and racing thoughts and a feeling of unreality, can be ended instantaneously by slicing through the skin. The uncontrolled flow of unconsciousness is halted by the

conscious mind, which reasserts its control through a self-mutilative procedure. This instinctual remedy serves to rein in an unconscious mind that has become rampant and is overwhelming the conscious self. Although the effects of this procedure are short-lived, the benefits are instantaneous and, whilst shocking and counter-productive to most observers, from the point of view of the self-harming individual, they are beneficial.

Biologically, it would appear that the feelings of anxiety, racing thoughts, and so on that are reported by self-mutilators are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. Of particular relevance is the neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin is found most abundantly in a part of the brain called the raphe nuclei, which has connections with all parts of the brain, but mostly with the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus is responsible for regulating appetites and sleep patterns, as well as impulsivity and aggression. It seems that low levels of serotonin inhibit the regulation of impulsive disorders. In other words, low serotonin seems to be responsible for the anxious, hypertense states that provide the trigger for much self-harm.

The act of cutting causes the production of pain-alleviating neurotransmitters called enkephalins. Enkephalins produce an effect similar to opium and heroin, and also serve to regulate emotions. This biological model indicates that low levels of serotonin are responsible for the unconscious and uncontrollable states of anxiety and stress that cause self-mutilative behavior, and the stimulation of enkephalins that results from the act of cutting are the means whereby such emotional states are regulated. The cutter is restoring some balance to the neurochemical make-up of the brain. Because serotonin levels will remain low, the relief provided by the act of self-mutilation will usually only be temporary, and another act of self-harm will be sought to provide further relief. This cycle can be treated with serotonin-enhancing drugs, such as Prozac.

“Why do violence to the body when the fault lies with the mind?” asks Grant. A possible answer would be that doing violence to the body causes change to occur in the mind. As we have seen, this change can be effective in those with a mental disorder and in those whose social group shares in the rites of self-mutilation. I suspect that most psychiatrists would regard practitioners of “Liber Jugorum” as suffering from a religious delusion, rather like the flagellants of old. Thelemites might disagree with this diagnosis, but then so would other religious self-mutilators. The important point is whether it works. There is undoubtedly a tremendous power generated through the spilling of blood, whether psychological, magickal, or aesthetic. When used wisely and consciously to invoke this power and exploit its healing and integrative qualities, “Liber Jugorum” could provide some benefits for a few, but perhaps not for many. The

real problem with “Liber Jugorum” is that its practice is a private and individual affair, like deviant self-harm. Without a wider social context in which to express itself, it is likely to be of benefit only to those who already have some sort of emotional or psychological problem.

“Invoke often” is the suggestion given for attaining Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel. If “Liber Jugorum” is to be used as part of the Great Work, *caveat mutilator* might be sage advice.

The Yoke

The Sun had almost set on the Western plain, and the air was turning chill under the clear, deep blue evening sky. Virico was shivering violently and had to be supported by a priest. He retched and vomited. “It’s alright, Virico,” said the priest, “it happens.” The priest helped Virico to the foot of the mound and let him sit on the grass. A calf hide was wrapped around his shivering shoulders. Behind them, at the top of the mound, sounds could be heard from inside the wooden hut that had so recently been built. People were clearing up the mess. Virico looked across the plain. “I don’t think I can go through with this,” he whispered hoarsely. The plain stretched as far as the still-glowing horizon. Virico looked to the land for guidance, but it sat cold and mute. A raven cawed bitterly in the woodland. The stout priest slapped him roughly on his back. “There’s no going back for you now, Virico,” he said. “Sorry. King Virico,” he corrected himself.

Night fell before Virico felt able to stand, and the stars pierced through the black sky like embers through a cloak. “Cirnos, what will happen if I back out now?” he asked the priest.

“It’s not possible for that to happen. You are King now. The gods have witnessed your succession. In you, the fate of our land resides.” The priest swept his arm across the black landscape, affecting grandeur. Cirnos was well aware of how Virico was feeling, and he sympathized. This first night was always hard. “Cirnos, my friend, if the fate of our land resides in me, then I fear for the future of our people. I feel like a sick coward. What we just witnessed up there . . . I’ve heard stories, rumors about it before, but nothing . . . nothing like . . .”

“Virico, only the strongest may become King, and then only for an appointed time. Tonight was your birth as a King. There is always pain and blood attending a birth. This is the birth night, and you will need to rest to regain your strength. But tomorrow you will stand before your people as their King. Their lives depend on you. And you have absolute command over them. The gods are wise, Virico, and they have chosen you to be King. The power of the gods now courses through your blood and shines forth from you across the land.”

“Spare me the priestly language, Cirnos.”

“Yes, sire. But the people will now obey you without question. They will end their lives at your word. They will hand over their women to you without a murmur should you ask for it. Tomorrow, as the Sun rises, so too will you wake

to absolute power."

The words sounded empty and hollow to Virico. What he had just seen had sickened him more than he expected. Any thought of women seemed frivolous and inappropriate. He started to walk towards the town. "You must think me shallow and callous, Cirnos," he shouted over his shoulder, "if you think such trifles will comfort me now." Cirnos watched Virico fading into the darkness. "Oh no, Virico," Cirnos whispered quietly, "I don't underestimate you at all."

Cirnos' wisdom was borne out the following day. Virico woke with a feeling of power and a virile lust for life. He would be King for one year, and during that time he would have unlimited and unquestioned power. But he was not crazed with his new authority; instead he felt fully the responsibility that lay with him. He would have a year to make his mark, a year to live. Today life seemed sharper and deeper. He was already filled with the numinous power of his vocation.

The ceremonial procedures passed off pleasingly and with the usual fervor. Virico was formally anointed as the supreme ruler. His mind was filled with the sense of his place, and of his responsibility to his people. But he was also aware of Cirnos' comment about choosing any girl he wanted. He was looking forward to being able to assert his sexual will without any obstruction or dissent. The thought was running around his mind somewhat, and he was glad when the formal ceremonies came to a conclusion.

Cirnos led the gathered population in the final chant that delivered their assent to be ruled by their new King. As they sang, Virico looked down at them. He was standing on the same mound where he had attended the previous night's ritual. The wooden temple which had stood in place only for a day had been removed. Virico realized that he was standing on the spot where his predecessor had stood last night, and the muscles in his legs felt fluid. Images of the scene he had witnessed flashed before his eyes until an effort of will managed to expel them. Even then, he felt that he could smell blood, and he was sickened with a trembling nausea.

Moments later the crowd was dispersing, and Virico walked to the King's hall with the more important townsmen. He gave gifts to them and they swore to him their loyalty. They drank and feasted together. After they had left, Virico called in one of his serving women. He told her to fetch and prepare for him a girl named Cornoi. She had recently become a woman, and her newly-developed body was a source of great fantasizing for Virico. When he had tried to seduce her a few months before, she had laughed at him.

After nightfall, Cornoi was presented to him. She had been bathed and anointed with various rich perfumes which filled the room with their delicious

scents. Her black hair had been plaited and fell down her shoulders. She was brought naked to Virico by the serving woman. Virico looked at her breasts and at the black hair on her pudendum. He approached her and ran his hands all over her naked body. Then, he quickly shoved himself into her. They stood fucking in the center of the room whilst the serving woman stood in the shadows. Virico came inside her, and, after his convulsions had ceased, he pushed her away. She left with the serving woman.

Virico was intoxicated with his new power, but the extraordinary happenings of the past day soon caught up with him and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

As the days passed, time seemed to slow down for Virico. His life had now become defined by a God-like power which was wedded to a definite endpoint. Knowing that the duration of his life was circumscribed in such a way gave a focus to everything that he did and legitimized the omnipotence he was enjoying. Every moment had become infused with a supernatural glow. Nothing was tedious or dull. Virico felt freer than he had ever felt before because his future was fixed. And, because there were no obstacles to the fulfilment of his desires in the mundane world, he ceased to be consumed with desire as such, and the energy thus released was directed to the world that would come beyond death.

Each morning he would rise early and stand at the threshold of the hall, watching the new Sun born in fire. He could sense that the retreating darkness was but another aspect of the light and that all things emerged from and returned to the stars and to God. He could feel that he was becoming interfused with the source of all things, and this knowledge made everything seem important and unimportant at the same time. He was not troubled by the trivial concerns of his people, the petty disputes and arguments that he had to judge. He saw clearly where justice lay and he adjudicated accordingly and without emotional engagement. Yet he was fully involved in living at every moment and with the entirety of his being.

This paradoxical state wherein supreme detachment from all earthly concerns blended with an utter empathy with all of existence was what made him kingly. He was neither benevolent nor tyrannical because he was unable to act within such contingent terms of reference. Absolute autonomy demanded a transcendence beyond all such categorizations. He attracted devotion and fear in equal measure. In this way he enabled God to emanate from his being.

As the season began to turn, and winter’s charnel breath frosted the land, Virico felt the rhythm of the dying Sun within himself. The Sun’s birth each morning, its death every night, belonged to smaller cycles within the larger cycle of the Sun’s year-long decline and rebirth. Virico began to feel within himself

resonant processes of emergence into being and passing away into darkness enfolded within each other; the human individual's own rhythm but one within many others; his heartbeat one cycle embedded within an infinitely enfolded universe; his soul one sphere encased in an infinity of spheres, and containing an infinity of souls. And he came to know the imminence of rebirth.

His dealings with Cornoi soon softened after he had begun to intuit something of these new realizations. They made love regularly, and although Virico became gentler and more considerate, there was no impulse from either party to equalize the power dynamics of their relationship. Even in their most intimate moments, when Cornoi's own sense of individuation was shattered in a moment of pleasure, their sense of emotional union was not felt as an identification between the two, but rather as the channelling of a particular energy through Virico into Cornoi. Cornoi felt elevated and completed, and Virico took pleasure in her ecstasy.

As Virico's feelings towards Cornoi softened, so too did his sense of superiority over his fellow men. Like the other young boys he had been brought up with, Virico had maintained a strong sense of obedience. Now that he had unquestioned power, the very concept of obedience seemed to lose meaning. He was the locus to which obedience was directed. But he came to sense that his previous understanding of the concept of obedience was flawed. The more he reflected on this, the more he came to realize that those who succumbed to deviant behavior, the criminals, the liars, were merely in error concerning their own position in the world. They acted as though they were at the center of the world and that the world should be formulated according to their own imperatives. Theirs was the error of excessive individualism. But at the same time there was a complementary error taking place within the virtuous. They acted according to rules and conventions that were outside of themselves, an external structure to which they had to conform. For them, it was as though judgement was a separate faculty, a pre-existing reality into which they had to fit. Theirs was the error of excessive conformism. Virico began to intuit that the key to unlocking this conundrum was by supporting the world in its conceit of authority; by always standing by the rules and conventions that were necessary for the smooth running of the group; but, at the same time, to secretly feed one's own hunger, silently and invisibly. Virtue consists in not getting caught. Virico was content with the world.

One night, as they lay naked together, Virico traced his fingers along Cornoi's outstretched arm, across her breasts, and down to her vulva. He pushed two fingers inside her and watched her face as she moaned. Cornoi arched her back and Virico sucked at her nipples. Virico knew that he would very soon mount her

and come inside her, but he did not feel any sense of urgency. Instead, the pleasure of the moment bled out from him so that he could no longer tell whether he was pleasuring Cornoi or she him. They shared a skin. Virico gently stroked her wet insides with his fingers and knew that flesh was a brief flowering of ecstasy. Their sexual union became a synaesthesia of organ perceptions dancing towards orgasm.

In the morning they stood together at the threshold, watching the new Sun being born.

On the longest day, a year after Virico's initiation, he once more stood at the foot of the mound on which the wooden temple had again been constructed. Accompanied by Cornoi, he walked to the head of the mound and into the temporary temple. There, he came face to face with Cirnos, who was standing next to the new King. Virico remembered when he was in that position a year ago, a lifetime ago. He took his allotted place before the idol of the horned god.

Cornoi was taken by the priests. She knelt down and lifted her head to the heavens. One of the priests took an extremely sharp knife, more than a foot long, and sliced it cleanly through Cornoi's throat. She gargled as the blood spurted, but she was held firmly in place by the priests. The priest who had made the cut held the head in place. They then lay her body on the ground and she bled into the Earth, her sightless eyes looking towards Virico.

Cirnos took the bloodied blade and handed it to Virico. Virico could remember what he had seen a year ago and was prepared to emulate it. He looked to the new King who, as yet, was ignorant of the ceremony, and he felt sympathy for him. Then he remembered that this new King was but he himself in another skin.

He held the handle of the knife in his right hand and clutched the blunt upper edge of the blade with his left. He positioned the sharp edge on the bridge of his nose, just below the bone. Then he sliced down, cutting his nose off. The pain collected as red behind his eyes as he threw the flesh towards the idol. He breathed heavily through his mouth. Then he placed the blade above his left ear and pulled down, cutting it clean off. The same with the right ear. They too were thrown towards the idol. The blood was pouring down his neck and pumping pain around his head. Then, Virico pulled his lower lip out with his left hand and sliced it off. The agonizing red behind his eyes blurred his sight and his thoughts had all but disappeared. He was now animated by ritual. This piece of flesh was added to the bloody pile.

Cornoi's eyes were lifeless and glazed, pointing in his direction but focused into a nothingness. Her tongue spilled from her mouth as though tasting the blood collecting around her head. Virico was beyond hope and despair as he looked to her. The throbbing pulse of pain in his head was blurring his vision

with a filter of red. He was panting in shallow breaths. He lifted the blade with his right hand and swung it down, using its own weight for momentum, slicing two fingers from his left hand. He bent to pick them up and collapsed to his knees, the blood dripping around him. The sound of wind coursed through his mind, bringing with it an intense nausea. From somewhere, the voice of Cirnos came to him, speaking words of encouragement. He didn't know if he had lost consciousness or not, but now he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and remembered the ritual.

He tried to stand up but could not. Still kneeling, he threw the two fingers he had severed onto the pile of offerings. Then, with the remaining thumb and two fingers of his left hand, he pulled the largest pinch of skin he could manage from his stomach. He had been given a shorter blade by Cirnos. With this he cut away the fold of flesh, as though butchering an animal. Despite the sharpness of the blade, he still had to hack somewhat. He paused and heard a storm of music; then he cut again. The flesh came off, and he desperately flung it away, falling forward as he did so. The pain was coming from so many places that it was almost ethereal. He touched his right hand to his belly where the wound was bleeding profusely. He felt the wound with his fingers. The flesh was warm and sticky. He moved his fingers around in the echo of another memory and spoke meaningless splutters of blood ecstasy. Cornoi's head twisted back to look at him longingly.

Another knife with an eight-inch blade had been put into his hand. He lifted it to his throat, still spitting red plosives. The final movement was sure and elegant, cutting through his windpipe. Virico fell forward towards Cornoi, hissing blood. He looked to her through red music. She stood up and came towards him. He stood and they embraced and kissed; she with the joy of Being in her eyes, he with the light of Being in his. And the blood music stopped.

THE IMMORTAL DEATH OF MISHIMA

When Yukio Mishima arose on the morning of November 25, 1970, he knew that it would be his last day on Earth. It was the deadline for completion of his novel, *The Decay of the Angel*, the fourth book in his tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*. He placed the completed manuscript, sealed in an envelope addressed to his publisher, on a table. Mishima had given intimations that the completion of the tetralogy would be the culmination of his life's work. A month before his death he wrote to his future biographer: "Finishing the long novel (*The Sea of Fertility*) makes me feel as if it is the end of the world."[116] The previous night he had left a note on his desk saying, "Human life is limited, but I would like to live forever."[117]

He had spent some time preparing for his last day. Just the week before, there had been a major exhibition on his life held in Tokyo. One hundred thousand people viewed the exhibition, a token of Mishima's popularity. Only Mishima and a few of his most trusted comrades knew that the exhibition was also a valediction. Prominently on display was Mishima's sixteenth-century samurai sword, made by Seki no Magoroku, which he would be taking with him on the morning of November 25 to stage an attempted *coup d'etat*.

Mishima's co-conspirators in the plan were four members of his private army, the *Tatenokai*, or Shield Society. This small corps (about one hundred men) was formed with the stated intention of protecting the Emperor and, due to Mishima's prestige, was allowed to use official military facilities for training purposes. Mishima had arranged a meeting with General Mashita on the morning of the 25th, and the group of five men was escorted to his office in the Ichigaya military base in Tokyo. There, they took the General hostage and demanded that all the soldiers present at the garrison be assembled on the parade ground to listen to a speech given by Mishima. Mishima delivered his halting speech to a chorus of jeers from the assembled soldiers. He concluded with the patriotic chant, "Long live the Emperor!"

Retiring back to the general's office he concluded that, "They did not hear me very well." He then stripped to the waist and knelt down. Again shouting, "Long live the Emperor!" he stabbed himself in the abdomen with a short sword. This was the ancient samurai form of suicide by disemboweling: *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*. He pulled the blade across his stomach, spilling blood into his lap until

his intestines poked out of the deep cut. His second-in-command, Masakatsu Morita, then attempted to behead Mishima to relieve his agony, as had been agreed beforehand. Morita aimed a blow but missed the neck, cutting deeply into Mishima's back. Another blow also missed the neck, and a third, though on target, failed to sever the head. Another of the *Tatenokai*, Hiroyasu Koga, then took over and sliced Mishima's head from his body. Morita then attempted an unsuccessful *seppuku*, barely penetrating his skin, and Furu-Koga cut his head off.

Mishima's act of *seppuku* was the first to take place in Japan since the end of the Second World War, when hundreds of Japanese subjects performed the ritual in the grounds of the Imperial Palace to apologize to the Emperor for having lost the war. Many of the combatants in the Pacific also committed *seppuku* rather than suffer the dishonor of being captured by the Americans. Mishima's suicide was radical and atavistic; it was a complex gesture, both culturally and individually; and, ultimately, despite the confusion surrounding his act, it ensured that he would make his mark on eternity.

The Japanese Prime Minister, on hearing the news of Mishima's death, commented that, "He must have been *kichigai*, out of his mind."[118] This judgement had more to do with the political establishment's sense of embarrassment at Mishima's anachronistic act than anything else. The point was expressed more clearly by the writer Nobuko Lady Albery:

> It was a political embarrassment as well, because just when Japan was on the point of becoming a member of the advanced industrialized nations, whom we have copied so doggedly all those years; and then, here comes this writer killing himself as if the clock were put back two centuries.[119]

In order to understand Mishima's radical suicide, it is necessary to understand the context of suicide in Japanese society, and the specific meaning of *seppuku* as a form of suicide. It is also necessary to consider Mishima's own ideas concerning ritual death; ideas which are a complex mix of the traditional and the idiosyncratic.

In Japan, suicide has never been the taboo act that it traditionally is in the West. Since the advent of Christianity, suicide in the West has been forbidden by the Church, and often also by law. This taboo against suicide stems from Augustine, who argued that life, being a gift from God, is not to be taken away, even by one's own hand. This taboo was enshrined in law and continues to cast a dark shadow into modern times. As recently as 1969, a teenager was birched in

the Isle of Man for attempting to commit suicide.[120] And it is still the case that official investigations into suicides will try their best to remain euphemistic about the cause of death. As A. Alvarez puts it:

> Religious and bureaucratic prejudices, family sensitivity, the vagaries and differences in the proceedings of coroners' courts and post-mortem examinations, the shadowy distinctions between suicides and accidents—in short, personal, official and traditional unwillingness to recognize the act for what it is—all help to pervert and diminish our knowledge of the extent to which suicide pervades society . . . For suicide to be recognized for what it is, there must be an unequivocal note or a setting so unambiguous as to leave the survivors no alternatives: all the windows sealed and a cushion under the dead head in front of the unlit gas-fire.[121]

In addition to the religious taboo against suicide, there are other significant differences in the perception of suicide in Japan and the West. Suicide in the West is now generally seen as a mental health issue, and the potential suicide is treated as a psychological problem. This diagnosis tends to come from a deeper assumption that the problem lies at the level of the individual. In Japan, there is a much stronger sense of social belonging, so that it is perfectly possible for someone to commit suicide for reasons that have more to do with social standing. There is a specific type of suicide that is seen to represent atonement for a social or legal misdeed (whether real or perceived). This type of suicide is known as *inseki-jisatsu*. In a study looking at Japanese attitudes to suicide, Aya Maeda writes:

> Suicide after a social scandal is called *inseki-jisatsu* (suicide to take responsibility for a scandal) in Japan, but the *inseki-jisatsu* occurs regardless of whether the person is guilty or guiltless. *Inseki-jisatsu* is caused by a sense of disgrace. Those who commit *inseki-jisatsu* think that a scandal related to them adversely affects a community which they belong to, and that the scandal disgraces their names regardless of the truth of the scandal . . . *Inseki-jisatsu* occurs in Japan because the Japanese people tend to possess a strong sense of belonging to their community, and they cannot imagine losing the community which forms their identity. After the *inseki-jisatsu*, people usually do not blame the people who have committed suicide . . . because blaming the dead is thought to be disrespectful in Japan.[122]

Whereas in the West suicide is a shameful, forbidden act, in Japan there is a

long tradition of the honorable suicide. For a Japanese person, suicide can be a means of making amends or redeeming himself. Suicide can also serve to make amends for another person. *Inseki-jisatsu* can sometimes be carried out by employees who wish to cover up for their bosses' corruption. The suicide will thus remove a key witness whilst at the same time atoning for any sense of scandal. This is considered to be a noble act, because it allows for the good name of one's community to remain intact. The ultimate honor, in this context, is to die for the Emperor. Most famously, the kamikaze pilots in the Second World War were eager to give their lives in service to the Emperor. To be chosen for such a suicide mission was considered a great honor.

This cultural distinction between Japanese and Western attitudes to suicide also extends to "murder-suicides":

> A Japanese mother (in Los Angeles) attempted to drown herself and her two children in the sea in 1985. The mother survived, but her two children died. This mother was prosecuted for murder, and the mother was regarded as an egoistic mother who killed her children without necessity in the USA. However, Japanese society was sympathetic to the mother. The mother and her children were treated as an expression of alteregoism, and it was thought that the children could not live happily without a mother even if they were not killed. Mothers who killed their children and then attempted suicide are usually not punished severely in Japan while in the USA those mothers are severely punished for the murder of their children.[123]

Even though Japanese society has changed rapidly and has become increasingly Westernized, it is still affected by its historical attitude towards suicide. According to the World Health Authority, Japan has the highest suicide rate of any developed country at almost 26 per 100,000 people.[124] About a quarter of suicides in Japan are motivated by financial concerns, and the number has been increasing since the global financial crisis in 2008 led to a contraction of the Japanese economy. Often, suicide is considered an honorable solution to debt because life insurance payments will cover the amount owing. Thus, social stigma is banished, and the person's good reputation remains unblemished.

It is necessary to bear in mind this important difference in attitudes between Western societies and Japan when considering Mishima's suicide. He came from a tradition that was capable of understanding the sense of honor that could be associated with suicide. Within this culture of honorable suicide, *seppuku* is considered as a particularly noble act. *Seppuku* was the traditional form of suicide practiced by the samurai, so it is associated with great courage and

aristocracy. The degree of courage needed to carry out this act is both immense and self-evident. According to Toyomasa Fusé, a renowned expert on the subject:

> Of all types of suicide, *seppuku* is considered to be the most painful. Since the lower abdomen has heavy muscle linings and fats, even the sharpest blade would not be able to pierce it easily. It is said that the deepest thrust of the sharpest blade could not be more than 7cm deep. A samurai committing *seppuku* is expected to stab the left side of his abdomen first and then slit it open sideways. In the process he will also cut and slit the internal organs, causing excruciating pain. It usually takes hours before one dies successfully, thereby prolonging the excruciating pain and requiring a superhuman courage and perseverance. It is understandable, then, that this form of suicide had become a way of dying and a badge of courage for a proud warrior class such as the samurai in Japan.[125]

Mishima's autopsy found that he had a cut five inches long and up to two inches deep across his abdomen.[126] His *seppuku* was evidently carried out according to the superhuman standards set down by the samurai, and would have required great physical strength as well as courage. If anything, Mishima's *seppuku* is even more remarkable for the fact that he was not trained to carry it out. His biographer, Henry Scott Stokes, interviewed two of Mishima's martial arts teachers who both confirmed that he was not trained to carry out *seppuku*. One commented that his wrists were stiff and that he was unable to hold his kendo sword correctly, whilst the other said that Mishima had asked him for details of how to carry out *seppuku*, on the pretext that he was to write something on the subject.[127]

In fact, Mishima had written a description of *seppuku* in gruesome detail some years earlier. In the short story, "Patriotism," he describes a young officer who is unwilling to act against his former comrades, who had taken part in the Ni Ni Roku rebellion. In order to maintain his honor, the officer commits *seppuku*:

> The lieutenant aimed to strike deep into the left of his stomach. His sharp cry pierced the silence of the room. Despite the effort he had himself put into the blow, the lieutenant had the impression that someone else had struck the side of his stomach agonizingly with a thick rod of iron. For a second or so his head reeled and he had no idea what had happened. The five or six inches of naked point had vanished completely into his flesh, and the white bandage, gripped in his clenched fist, pressed directly against his

> stomach. He returned to consciousness. The blade had certainly pierced the wall of the stomach, he thought . . . With only his right hand on the sword the lieutenant began to cut sideways across his stomach. But as the blade became entangled with the entrails it was pushed constantly outward by their soft resilience; and the lieutenant realized that it would be necessary, as he cut, to use both hands to keep the point pressed deep into his stomach. He pulled the blade across. It did not cut as easily as he had expected . . . By the time the lieutenant had at last drawn the sword across to the right side of his stomach, the blade was already cutting shallow and had revealed its naked tip, slippery with blood and grease. But, suddenly stricken by a fit of vomiting, the lieutenant cried out hoarsely. The vomiting made the fierce pain fiercer still, and the stomach, which had thus far remained firm and compact, now abruptly heaved, opening wide its wound, and the entrails burst through, as if the wound too were vomiting. Seemingly ignorant of their master's suffering, the entrails gave an impression of robust health and almost disagreeable vitality as they slipped smoothly out and spilled over into the crotch . . . Blood was scattered everywhere. The lieutenant was soaked in it to his knees, as he sat now in a crumpled and listless posture, one hand on the floor . . . The blade of the sword, now pushed back by the entrails and exposed to its tip was still in the lieutenant's right hand. It would be difficult to imagine a more heroic sight than that of the lieutenant at this moment, as he mustered his strength and flung back his head.[128]

Mishima was viscerally aware of the gory reality of *seppuku* even if he was not formally trained to carry it out. He was not naïve about what *seppuku* would entail. But at the same time he did have a very romantic view of *seppuku*, glorifying it as an aesthetically pleasing, divinely sanctioned, and heroic death.

His fascination with the aesthetic aspects of violent death was first presented in his autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*, published when he was 24 years old. In this work, Mishima recounts finding an art reproduction of Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian* amongst his father's books. As he looks at the picture of the male nude penetrated by arrows, he becomes overwhelmed with sexual arousal, filled with "pagan joy,"[129] and for the first time in his life masturbates, ejaculating into his hand. This conflation of homosexual arousal, artistic aestheticism, bloody violence, and youthful death would remain important concerns of Mishima's throughout his life.

Mishima's sense of "pagan joy" whilst masturbating over the painting of Sebastian is apt, as Sebastian has long been both an unofficial patron saint of

homosexuals and an honorary pagan. It has long been recognized that depictions of Sebastian can attract inappropriate sexual attention. In the early sixteenth century a particularly lifelike depiction of a nude Sebastian by Fra Bartolommeo had to be removed from the church where it had been on display because women were admitting through the confessional that it was inspiring them to sinful thoughts.[130] More recently, Derek Jarman filmed a quasi-pornographic life of Sebastian, which fell afoul of the censors due to its graphic content.

The historical Sebastian was a Captain in the Praetorian Guard who promulgated Christianity and actively sought to convert others to that faith. He was originally a favorite of the Emperor Diocletian, but when he fell from grace due to his religious activities, he was ordered to be executed. He was tied up and shot at with arrows. Although the iconography depicting his martyrdom is usually associated with this scene, he did not actually die from his wounds. He was rescued and nursed back to life by a woman, Saint Irene. Sebastian then denounced the Emperor and was clubbed to death as a punishment.

The fact that Sebastian was a favorite of Diocletian but then, later in life, denounced him, provides an interesting parallel with Mishima's own life. When he was a boy, Mishima was awarded a silver watch by Emperor Hirohito for his academic achievements. As was customary for the Japanese, Mishima worshipped the Emperor. But following Japan's defeat in 1945, Hirohito was forced by the Americans to renounce his divinity. In a speech to the nation, he stated that the Emperor was not divine, and that the Japanese were not superior to other races. For many Japanese, particularly Right-wing nationalists, this was an unacceptable humiliation. Mishima was later to write a novella in which the ghosts of kamikaze pilots return from the dead to berate the Emperor for renouncing his divinity. In Japan, criticism of the Emperor was a severe social taboo. Despite Mishima's avowed, indeed somewhat extreme, worship of the Emperor, he became a controversial figure in Japan for this criticism of the Emperor. Mishima saw the Emperor as a fixed, solar principle in whom was embodied the sacred potential of the Japanese people. Like Sebastian, whose denunciation of Emperor Diocletian was motivated by knowledge of a higher principle, allegiance to which was more powerful than allegiance to life, Mishima's criticism of Hirohito was inspired by the realization that the Emperor was a divine presence, and that this divinity was the source of ultimate meaning. His allegiance is primarily to this numinous presence and only secondarily to the person of the Emperor. "Why did the Emperor have to become a human being?" he asks in *Voices of the Heroic Dead*. And, like Sebastian, Mishima was willing to die in service to this ultimate metaphysical allegiance.

Mishima was later to write a sort of aesthetic manifesto, *Sun and Steel*, in which he described how his role as a writer had become inadequate, and how he sought fulfillment through the cultivation of the body. As Mishima saw it, words had led him towards a certain conception of beauty; but due to the temporal corrosiveness of words, which could only reveal beauty by segmenting reality into semantic chunks—and thereby presenting a succession of endings to the continuity and purity of life—the pursuit of literature was no longer sufficient to his ambition. He equates intellectual activity with nocturnal and weak pursuits, and he contrasts this with the practice of physical development, which is solar and strong. Through this physical development, he is able to aspire to an ideal form, one that can achieve a greater sense of purity than merely spiritual or intellectual development.

Because Mishima had come to see literature as hamstrung in its pursuit of beauty, due to the temporal and subjective constraints that delimit its scope, he turned instead to the body as a means of approaching the ideal. As in *Confessions of a Mask*, written almost twenty years earlier, he sees the death of the idealized, youthful body as a sort of perfection: "Here lies the mysterious significance of an early death, which the Greeks envied as a sign of the love of the gods."[131] The ageing process becomes a sort of falsification, as it is a degeneration of youth, beauty, and purity. Mishima had come to see youthful death as a means of cheating this degeneration, of retaining purity, and of conferring immortality.

The problem for Mishima was that at the time he was writing *Sun and Steel*, he was no longer a young man. He had missed his opportunity to be conscripted to an early death during the Second World War. In order to achieve an ideal physical form, and so recapture the perfection of youth, Mishima takes up bodybuilding. The weights come to embody the principle of steel: a counterpoint to human flesh that confers a condition of hard immortality. By fashioning his body in this way, he is able to create a form that is somehow an unveiling of a deeper truth: "By its subtle, infinitely varied operation, the steel restored the classical balance that the body had begun to lose, reinstating it in its natural form, the form that it should have had all along."[132] Like a sculptor, he reveals the perfect form that lies inherent in the uncarved stone. And thus, in diurnal, solar, physical activity, Mishima finally creates the sculpted form that will provide a fitting sacrifice for the Emperor. This sacrifice will allow his form to retain its recreated perfection for eternity.

The attempt to achieve an aestheticization of the body, and an elevated sense of purity, ran concurrent with Mishima's lifestyle, which was, in many respects,

deeply embedded in the Kali Yuga. His homosexuality was notable in Japan at that time, if not for its practice then for his literary depiction of it. Indeed, there was no term for homosexuality in Japanese. According to *Matthew Chozick*:

> In the modern idiom, one might say he was 'outed as gay', but circa 1950s Japan lacked a conceptual term that linked sexual practice to identity in this capacity. Likely for this reason Mishima felt it necessary to coin the first word of its kind, *danshokuka*, which translates to the effect of 'man lover person'. This neologism, presented in the novel *Forbidden Colors* (1954), starkly broke away from traditional Japanese notions of sexual orientation in favor of a more Western construction of the self.[133]

In *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima describes the masturbation fantasies he had as a teenage boy. These involve a great deal of torture, blood, and cannibalism, always inflicted on young men. The literary expressions of his homosexual desire were always explicit and morbid, and seem to jar with his fanatical pursuit of an idealized purity. Further to this, he posed for a series of somewhat avant-garde photographs, collected in the book, *Torture by Roses*. He also posed for photographs as Saint Sebastian, modelled on the Reni painting he described masturbating over in *Confessions*. And he also starred in a number of downmarket gangster films. His house was very large and styled as a Western colonial house, at a time when Japanese houses tended to be small and modest, and of an Eastern character. So, in many respects he was unusual in being very interested in and influenced by contemporary Western tendencies whilst at the same time developing an increasingly extreme view of Japanese purity.

All of this leads many observers to conclude that the Right-wing nationalism that Mishima adopted in the 1960s, culminating in his formation of the *Tatenokai* and attempted *coup d'etat*, was another mask that he wore, one that provided him with a convenient pretext to commit the suicide that he had aestheticized and eroticized for so long. Whilst it would be foolhardy to try to identify the "real" motives of such a complex man, it is still possible to see that this argument is inadequate to the facts. One critic who follows this line of thought declares that Mishima's suicide was "the ultimate in literary irony."[134] A rereading of the extract quoted above concerning the physical effects of performing *seppuku* should give appropriate context to thoughts of an ironic suicide. A person does not cut out his intestines as an act of literary irony.

Yet, at the same time, Mishima's embrace of nationalism was somewhat problematic. In *Runaway Horses*, the second novel of his final tetralogy, he tells the story of Isao, a Right-wing nationalist intent on sparking an Imperial

revolution. Isao is a fanatic inspired by a book, *The League of the Divine Wind* by Tsunanori Yamao. In *The League of the Divine Wind*, the story is told of a group of nationalist samurai who objected to the reforms of the Meiji restoration, such as commerce with foreigners and the prohibition on wearing a sword. They attempt to instigate a revolution to cleanse Japan of these impurities. When the revolution fails, each of the men commits *seppuku*. Isao is utterly enchanted with this book and gathers together a group of like-minded nationalists who attempt to follow the example of the League of the Divine Wind. His intent is to carry out a series of assassinations and attacks on infrastructure, then to commit *seppuku*. His idea of *seppuku* is utterly romantic: "Before the sun . . . at the top of a cliff at sunrise, while paying reverence to the sun . . . while looking down upon the sparkling sea, beneath a tall noble pine . . . to kill myself."[135] When the Lieutenant to whom he describes this ideal points out that it is not possible to choose the exact circumstances of one's death, the text continues: "Isao gave no heed to the Lieutenant's words. Subtle discourse, exegesis, the 'on the one hand this, on the other that' approach—all these were foreign to his way of thinking. His ideal was drawn upon pure white paper in fresh black ink. Its text was mysterious, and it excluded not only translation but also every critique and commentary."[136]

Isao is committed to the purity of the act rather than the contingencies of its enactment or the likelihood of its success. For him, it is essential that there must be the possibility of ultimate meaning in life, and for him this meaning is effected through the figure of the Emperor. What can be seen as a pathological suicidal impulse is, in fact, rather more subtle than that. Isao cannot countenance living in a Japan that has become corrupted through internal venality and imported decadence. For him, the Emperor is the point of singularity around which all else must orbit for life to have meaning. His revolutionary act is exoterically aimed at purifying Japan and resisting the encroachment of the foreign barbarians, but esoterically it is aimed at achieving the realization, the immanence, of the existence of an ultimate principle:

> And the greatest sin is that of a man who, finding himself in a world where the sacred light of His Majesty is obscured, nevertheless determines to go on living without doing anything about it. The only way to purge this grave sin is to make a fiery offering with one's own hands, even if that itself is a sin, to express one's loyalty in action, and then to commit seppuku immediately. With death, all is purified. But as long as a man goes on living, he can't move either right or left, or take any action whatever,

without sinning.[137]

As *Runaway Horses* unfolds, Isao appears more and more as a misguided figure. He is continually coming up against the reality of the contingencies of life that jar with the beautiful ideal he has constructed for his own life. His father betrays him to the police before his group is able to carry out their attacks. His father reasons that Isao is a naïve idealist who lacks pragmatism: "There's such a thing as the favorable moment. Determination alone counts for nothing. Thus I have to conclude that my son is too young. The necessary discernment is still beyond him . . . Rather than take action, the best course is to achieve results without acting."[138] This assessment is a fundamental misunderstanding of Isao, and by extension, of Mishima.

The interesting thing about *Runaway Horses* is that the character of Isao is an exact analogue of Mishima in many respects. At the time of writing the book, Mishima himself was in the process of forming a small corps of Right-wing nationalists who would attempt a similar, albeit less murderous, rebellion. It is also certain that Mishima was already committed to the idea of carrying out *seppuku* as the climax to this action. Many critics have dismissed Mishima's politics as silly and suggested that the formation of the *Tatenokai* and the assault on Ichigaya were merely elaborate pretexts for the performance of Mishima's *seppuku*. The characterization of Isao tends to support this analysis, as it shows that Mishima has moved on from the idealized and romantic notions of heroic *seppuku* that he depicted in "Patriotism." Instead, we can read Isao as Mishima's attempt to detach himself somewhat from the naïve idealism he had previously described. Unlike the officer in "Patriotism," Isao is unable to achieve the death that he had envisaged. He exists in a messy world of contingency, and when he finally commits *seppuku* he must do so hastily, before being captured. This leads some to conclude that Mishima was far too sophisticated to really believe in the ideals of the *Tatenokai*, and that he simply exploited them for his own narcissistic ends.

There is some plausibility to this view, but it is crucial to understand that the *Tatenokai* and attempted coup were not incidental to Mishima's intentions, but were the apposite vehicle for them. He was sincere in his Right-wing nationalism and in his wish to re-establish samurai values, and he was willing to die for this cause. Yet at the same time he realized that there would be no chance of his miniscule, poorly trained army succeeding in their coup. This disjunction between the purity of his idealized ambition and the pragmatic possibilities open to him also encompasses the various personal and artistic proclivities that seem

out of sync with his uncompromising aesthetic of death and Emperor-worship, such as his homosexuality and sadism. It would appear that his awareness of weakness, decadence, and egotism was no barrier to his grasp of numinous purity. And in death, he was able to transcend all of these things and realize perfection. Isao, despite not being able to commit *seppuku* in the manner he had dreamed of, nonetheless experiences a profound and victorious vision in death: "The instant that the blade tore open his flesh, the bright disc of the sun soared up and exploded behind his eyelids."[139]

Lying behind all of Mishima's diverse interests was a deeper imperative to establish the reality of an ultimate source of meaning, beyond human contingency. For Mishima, this principle was embodied in the Emperor. The siege of Ichigaya was undertaken with a sincere motive, but the external, real-world outcome of the event was always going to be a matter of secondary importance. The incidental details of his suicide, including his lifelong preparation, were arranged with a superior artist's eye for the dramatic. But all of this was in service to a greater idea, one which could only be realized through transcending contingency. With his death he was able to sacramentalize his life and achieve a final victory by touching the face of the divine. As the note read, "Human life is limited, but I would like to live forever."

An Experiment in Relativity

Memories fall around me like fragments of a casual defenestration. Some cut and draw blood, others break into latent shards, the hidden detritus of a wasted life. What remains to show for a life? What has been gained except knowledge that can't be unknown? To what end? We really are millions of yesterdays.

Memory is all I am now, but even that is fallible. I can't remember exactly how I heard about it all to begin with, but there used to be a whole slew of underground magazines that dealt with occult topics. From one or another of those, I probably first came across the term "chaos magick." There used to be a small hippy-*cum*-pagan shop close to the university when I was a student, and I do remember buying a few of those magazines from there: *Pagan News, Talking Stick,* and others whose names I don't remember. I remember one afternoon in my small, hated room in halls, flicking through this esoteric and weird material, lighting joss sticks, and getting stoned. Somehow, the ideas and praxes presented in those journals seemed to fall on fertile ground with me. It was as if part of my psyche, or perhaps my genetic constitution, was waiting to find these notions; they were the key to parts of me that had always been present but which had always been locked away.

And then, soon after, I remember talking with someone at the Pagan Society. He mentioned to me the idea (or slogan, rather) of "fake it then make it." And the door to another room seemed to open inside me. Somehow there seemed to be the prospect of a different level of reality coming into focus in my life. It was not pure, it was tainted with the aspirations and hopes I projected onto it, and also with the pseudo-glamour its adherents sought to veil it with; but it was primary and immediately accessible. This was the thing that animated it for me.

Within all this, the name Austin Osman Spare seemed to be of singular importance. It was not easy to track down material of this nature back then; several trips to London and a number of mail-order purchases ensued. The various books I obtained delineated an obscure philosophy and, still worse, it was expressed in complex, almost private terms. After some study, I came to understand the thrust of this strange magician, or at least I came to my own understanding of him. The works themselves, short and explosive sub-Nietzschean tracts, expressed a sort of reversal of conventional ontology. Instead of regarding man as a subject who perceives a prior external reality, Spare posits the notion that we create our reality as some kind of lucid dream. Our belief

about the world is not limited to opinions and superficial notions, but rather the very act of perceiving is itself an act of belief. The existence of the world, after the German Idealists, is not taken to be a separate, autonomous reality, but neither is its existence questioned. Its objective existence derives from the fact that we believe in it. The deeper the belief, the more it appears as an independently existing entity. The entire field of our awareness is a manifestation of our beliefs.

For Spare, whose artistic vision appears to have guided his entire approach to life and metaphysics, the existence of the world as manifested belief raises the intriguing notion that by changing the belief you can thereby change the world. And this is no mere solipsistic conceit. He really does mean that a change in belief about something causes reality to change. But this is not as easy to achieve as it might sound. The required change in belief cannot be merely the adoption of a different philosophy, or the promulgation of a changed opinion. It must, for the magick to be successful, be an actual change of belief. The difficulty of this method soon becomes apparent. If I want a new job, it seems impossible to actually believe that I have a new job if I don't; at this level, it would be mere delusion. And this is where Spare's sorcery takes a novel turn. In order to change belief about the manifested world, it is necessary to trick the consciousness. Spare achieves this sleight of mind with the ontological conjuring trick of sigilization. A desire is written down, and the letters are merged and simplified until only a symbol remains. This symbol embodies the desire, and it becomes the focal point for a magickal rite which seeks to charge it with potency through a frenzied state of mind, and then bury it deep within the unconscious. A few weeks later, you will find that you are unexpectedly offered a new job. As if by magick.

For most of the occult "scene," this element of Spare's work seems to be sufficient: a concise and efficient magickal praxis that offers results, and offers them quickly. And it certainly bestows a glamor upon the practitioner of these arts. But I soon became bored with the practice of sigilization and with what I came to perceive as its haphazard results. I came to realize that the formulation of any particular desire could never be achieved with purity. There was always the possibility that submerged elements of the psyche would be manipulating the magickian in unseen ways, and to achieve quite unexpected things. This louche suspicion proved to be astute.

I once performed a spell to gain wealth. I used the sigilization technique to turn the desire into a symbolic form and meditated on it as I burned its painted image in a candle flame. This destruction of the symbol of desire ensured that it would embed itself in my subconscious. I tried not to think about the spell for

the next few days, but it proved impossible. I kept hankering after results, and my impatience was not entirely due to my interest in magick. In fact I needed money, unemployed as I was. After several weeks I genuinely did forget about the spell and my interest in chaos magick also waned somewhat. Then I received a phone call from my mother, who informed me that an aunt on my father's side had died. I could barely feign interest in the conversation; I had the TV on mute, and suddenly became very interested in the daytime game show that I had previously been ignoring. I had never liked my aunt, who was an unbearable snob of a woman. She had grown into a bitter and childless old age that fitted her like a gauntlet. If anything, I was mildly pleased that she was dead.

A few days, later my mother phoned me again. My aunt's will had instructed that her estate be divided equally between her nieces and nephews, just five of us. The house she had died in was her childhood home and was a large Victorian structure on a quiet road that had somehow avoided the decline that had taken over some of the neighboring areas. In short, it was a desirable property for a greedy landlord. I salivated at the prospect of a fifth of its market value all the way to the pub. In the beer garden, I bumped into some friends, but I kept quiet about my good news. I didn't want to seem crass. A crow landed in a tree opposite me, waiting for spilled crisps. As some people moved away from a nearby table, he saw his chance and descended to finish off a half-eaten packet. We all watched him as he pecked away. Then he tried to look for more at the bottom of the packet. He took the packet in his beak and lifted it to try to tip out any remaining crisps. And I saw the manufacturer's logo on the packet upside down. It was identical to the sigil I had created many weeks earlier. A sickly, drunk frisson lapped over me as I realized that the spell conjured to bring me wealth had worked by killing my aunt.

As the implications of this realization fell upon me, or rather emerged from within me, I came to see that the desire to obtain wealth was just a pretext. Whilst I thought that I wanted, in fact needed, money, this was not the real reason for the performance of the spell. "I" was not really aware of what "I" wanted at all. The part of me that felt no compunction in killing my aunt for money had manipulated me into performing a spell that could result in just such a thing. Whilst I would have never consciously wished for anyone to die for so base a motive as monetary gain, my indifference to the news of her death and my delight at hearing of my inheritance convinced me that this was my secret desire all along.

This was a fearful and demeaning revelation. How could I begin to accept the fact that "I" was such a Machiavellian person beneath the conscious layers of personality? And if those "layers of personality" were so superficial, so much

artifice, then what did that say for my individuality, the very thing that I had always previously assumed was the entirety of me? The thought was somewhat sickening, like one of those science fiction films where the reality the characters (and the audience) had believed in all along is shown to be false, and a sinister sub-stratum is revealed as the truth. My truth had surfaced and I didn't think I could bear to look at it.

And so, gradually, and without consciously noting the fact, I started to drift away from anything to do with the occult. This was facilitated by the inheritance that came my way. My lifestyle began to alter for the better, and I found that I had better things to do with my time than try to alter reality. Reality had begun to seem rather benevolent to me. I certainly continued to buy occult books; in fact, my ill-gained wealth insured that I could buy precious editions that I had previously only dreamed of. But my deeper interest in the subject was waning. In truth, I read barely a word of the pristine hardback volumes that decorated my growing library; I was content with gazing at the pictures.

This proved fortuitous. On one of my shopping expeditions to the occult booksellers of London, I visited a favorite and venerable store. As soon as I set foot inside I saw her: a perfect execution of one of Spare's more sublime series of portraits. She was predominantly green in appearance, the background hue suffusing the facial structure with a reflected, refracted glow. The short, disciplined hairstyle hid a protean labyrinth of pencil lines winding and meandering their way to nothing and everything. And the face itself, which was unmistakably that of a twenties or thirties film star, was mildly elongated, as if viewed through one of those distorting mirrors popular in fairgrounds.

It was one of Spare's sidereal paintings, an experiment in relativity. The slight twist to normal visual representation was a sign that these paintings were intended to put the observer into an uncanny position. As I gazed at the picture, I understood this immediately and pre-verbally. Over the course of the intervening years I have been, however inadequately, able to articulate this effect with some degree of precision. At least, this is my hope. The experiments in relativity alert us to the fact that we are observing the subject of the painting in a fundamentally weird way, and from a peculiar perspective. They achieve visually what Spare's ontology and sigilization achieve magickally: they alert us to reality's malleability to our beliefs. These observations may not have much purchase with those custodians of art history whose careers depend upon the precise demarcation of *oeuvres* and periods, and whose bottom line is a figure in pounds. But they are observations that I have experienced with my own eyes. Or rather, they are observations that I have experienced with my own faculty of perception.

In any case, I knew immediately that this was a painting I wanted to buy.

Upon enquiry, I found that it was well within my means, and so it was purchased there and then. The lady who packaged it up for me (very carefully, it has to be said) seemed most keen to ensure that I would be a good custodian of the painting. She chatted away, seemingly idly, but expertly pumping me for information about my knowledge of occult subjects, trying to ascertain whether I would be worthy of the picture she was selling. It was a strange feeling. I had the money, in cash; yet I felt that I was being judged as to my suitability.

Evidently, she was satisfied, as she handed over the newly-wrapped parcel, safe in bubble wrap and brown paper. My dalliance with the esoteric had obviously borne some fruit. I was not quite the dilettante I had begun to perceive myself as. Holding my new acquisition with some care, I was about to leave the shop when the lady proprietor came to open the door for me. She seemed reluctant to let the painting leave her shop, although she obviously knew that it was inevitable. “I hope you will enjoy your painting,” she said to me, propping the door open. “But I would avoid hanging it in your bedroom. Or even sleeping in the same room as it; it can provoke very bad dreams.” It seemed like a very poor after-sales pitch, but I was unperturbed.

Of course, I was never going to hang the picture in my bedroom; I wanted it in the living room, where everyone could see it. There would have been something entirely perverse about buying such a beautiful painting only to hide it away for private contemplation. And it became a sort of talking point, although no one else was as taken with it as I was. Probably because Spare was such an obscure artist, it was rare for anyone to comment on the painting without being prompted to do so. Whilst this was initially a source of frustration for me, I came to accept it and to reconcile myself to having a more highly developed aesthetic sensibility than my friends.

One evening, as I was flicking through one of my esoteric volumes, I came across a very unusual word that jumped out at me: karezza. As I read backwards and forwards around this word, I discovered that it denotes a particular form of sigil magick. According to this author, one creates a sigil to fulfill a desire in the usual way and then concentrates on it before sleep. The charging of the sigil is achieved through the nocturnal vice of onanism, although without emission; the aim being to inseminate the desire. The sigil should take the form of a pendant hanging around the neck of an otherwise naked, beautiful woman. When sleep grants its pleasing dreams to the practitioner, the unconscious mind will be freed to unravel the locked mysteries of desire and allow the granting of the wish to the subsequently awakened self.

Naturally, this was the sort of magick that appealed to me. I could even do it in my sleep. And if there was a creeping sense of apprehension prompted by

memories of the collateral fallout from my previous sigil work, I can honestly say that I was unaware of it. I resolved to set to somnolent work immediately.

I sorted out an old sleeping bag that had been bought for ever-deferred camping trips and lay down in it on the floor of the living room, beneath *Experiment in Relativity No. 20.* I had earlier prepared a suitable sigil, simple enough in its pictographic form to be visualized easily. Perhaps there was a subliminal remembrance of my previous worry about this type of magic, because this time I had selflessly prepared a sigil to gain wisdom. It seemed safe enough.

The preamble to sleep was completed efficiently enough, but the dreams I had seemed to bear no relation to the sigil. The following night I went through the motions again, thinking that this was perhaps a rather vacuous and stupid ritual. Again, the dreams of the evening were seemingly random. I decided to give up on this enterprise, but then I remembered that in my magickal diary, I had dated four empty pages, ready to receive the notes I had expected to be filling it with. The diary was woefully sparse as it was, and it undermined my impression of myself as one of the occult cognoscenti. I decided to persist for two further nights, just to fill in the prepared space.

This proved fortunate. On the third night, I had dreams, very bad dreams, of death. I shall quote from the magickal diary verbatim:

> 4th August 1998. I had a very bad night last night but at the same time my dreams were vivid and full of meaning so maybe it will prove to be useful? For the first time in my life I have experienced a recurring dream but in my case the recurrence has occurred all in one night. I spent the night running through the same dream again and again. Probably, I only spent ten minutes or so in this one dream, but I feel exhausted this morning, and it feels to me as though I have genuinely spent the whole night just repeating the same dream. My hands are still shaking, and only now is the utter terror beginning to recede. It begins with sunlight. I come to awareness with the blinding dawn Sun directly before me. As I become aware of my surroundings it becomes apparent that I am standing very far from the ground. There is a great distance beneath me, and it seems too much to take in. Gradually (or so it seems) I come to realize that I am standing on a vast, skeletal wooden structure. Like some sort of primitive scaffolding, it consists of long, thin wooden posts lashed together with twine. I have no way of seeing the ground clearly, and I wouldn’t want to look down in any case, so I can’t tell how securely it is embedded in the ground. It feels perilous. I am standing on a thin pole, perhaps two inches wide, and I have only a single vertical upright to cling to. I can feel my legs trembling wildly

> at the horror of my predicament. Further along I can see another man screaming with absolute hopeless terror at his predicament. I also begin to sense that there are other men above and below me in similar states of fear. I have no knowledge of how I got here or why. All I can feel is the terror of the drop beckoning below me and the convulsive weakness in my legs. In the manner of dreams a great deal of time appears to pass very quickly. It feels as though I had spent many hours in such a horrible situation. Then I begin to see the bodies falling past me. Evidently, others higher up than me have become unable to continue holding on and are plummeting to the ground. The horror is unbearable. Not just the fear of death but the fear of the manner of death. I stand, trembling, looking out at an indifferent sky waiting to die. Then I feel my legs beginning to buckle, and I lose my grip on the wooden post. I am falling, and I can feel the sickening feeling in my belly from the swift drop. Then I start to become aware of my surroundings and realize that I am standing very far from the ground. And so it begins again. My impression is that this went on all night, but, as I said, this is probably not so. Even writing this account down has again rekindled the horrible, sickening feeling within me: the terror of a horrific death.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to add that I abandoned the fourth night's ritual.

Rereading the notes from my magickal diary, I can see that something is missing. Despite my attempts to capture in words the essence of the terror that I experienced, the actual feeling is absent. The words simply point to a half-understood state of mind, they evoke no angst in themselves; they are easily classified and filed away. I do not have the means to convey the nature of the horror I felt that night, but it might give some indication if I mention that there was a sharper flavor to the dream. Each time that I felt the experience of waking to consciousness, and seeing the dawning Sun, there was a deep feeling that I was returning from death. It doesn't make any sense, because death is the one thing we can't return from, but I cannot express it any more clearly. The whole dream was infused with the taste of death. From waking into the light to falling towards the darkness, I feel as though I experienced a great cycle of living and dying with full consciousness of the reality and inevitability of its imminent annihilation.

Despite the genuinely affecting nature of this experience, life continued relentlessly on and, as is the way with dreams, the feeling faded back into a background texture, barely noticed during daylight hours. But sometimes at night I would find that I awoke with that recognizable dread, staring into blackness with the touch of death on my fingertips. Each time this happened I

had a strong, though inchoate, sense that I had just returned from the edge of the event horizon; that I had been permitted a temporary escape, but that soon I would go back to the black nullity that consumes everything, and that sooner or later I would never return from it. I don’t think it added a sense of gravitas to my personality. On the contrary, it simply contributed to a morose stoicism that saw little point in getting out of bed in the mornings.

Over time, my inheritance was pissed away. I ended up back where I was before I came into money, but older. I began to sell my limited occult books, many of which had become ridiculously expensive. This helped to stave off the inevitable for a short time. When they had gone, the only thing I had left worth selling was the painting. I advertised it in the usual channels (taking great care to emphasize its authentic provenance) and eventually found a buyer in the person of the head of one of the more interesting occult organizations. We arranged a meeting where money changed hands and the picture left my life. The buyer was a pleasant and gregarious man, and an interesting conversationalist. I didn’t consider mentioning the casual curse that seemed to hang over the painting; perhaps I told myself that with his greater occult skills, he would be protected from such things. I don’t know, but in any case I needed the money.

And now, when I wake into the blackest part of the night with the sickening feeling of falling twisting my stomach to a sharp nauseous fear, I sense that this recurring dream of life will sooner or later end, and that I will finally awake to an infinite nullity. Such is the gift of wisdom.

The Presence of the Past:

From Ancestor Worship to

Hauntology

We never manage to bury the dead completely. Their words still echo down to us from beyond life's event horizon in direct contravention of physical law. Our stance towards death is a determining factor in how the dead return to us; in what form and with what significance they haunt the living. Although they are always there, the ways in which they interact with us vary and shift through time. And, at the present time, there is a strange blend of residual religious funerary rites and atheistic materialism. It feels very much as though we go through the motions of dispatching the dead to the next world without believing a word of it. But, whether we believe it or not, the dead continue to return, as they always have and always will.

The dead return to us as memories, dreams, reflections; but also as theological dogmas, ideologies, and ghosts. For most of human history, we have managed to understand this and to organize our lives so as to accommodate the presence of the dead. It is a peculiarly modern conceit that consigns the dead to a zone of absolute nothingness and unbeing, and this despite the ubiquity of images of the dead in literature and film. It seems that we can only confront death through the prism of entertainment, safe in the knowledge that ghosts are firmly confined to a fictional world. But there is nothing really entertaining nor fictional about death; not as it actually is. It is a very real legacy and the one imminent destiny.

Funerary rites date back to the earliest humans. It has always been a part of being human to take care of the dead, and this taking care indicates a knowledge that the dead are still here. The first burial mound was built for Freyr, the Vanir god. Freyr became the lord of Sweden after his father, Njord, and his rule brought great wealth and harvest, according to the *Saga of the Ynglings.* He established a temple at Uppsala and was worshipped as a god. When he became ill, his subjects:

> built a great mound and they put in a door and three windows. And when Freyr was dead, they carried him into the mound in secret, and said to the Swedes that he still lived, and they kept him there for three years . . . When the Swedes all realised that Freyr was dead but the harvests and peace continued, then they believed that it should be so while Freyr was in

> Sweden and they did not want to burn him, and they called him the World-God, they sacrificed mostly for harvest and peace ever since.[140]

There are two important things to note about this account of Freyr. Firstly, he was the World-God. This status is confirmed by the "Skirnismal," in which Freyr is said to sit on the high throne Hlidskjalf, which grants omniscience, and which later becomes Odin's throne. Secondly, the Swedes decided not to cremate Freyr as was traditional at the time, but to leave his remains in the burial mound. This marks the beginning of ritual inhumation. The belief that the power of the god to provide peace and good harvest would continue after his death is linked to his continuing presence in the burial mound. These funerary monuments stand in place of the departed and continue to exert the power and influence of the dead over the living.

The burial mound was to become a place of numinous power, where the presence of the dead could be channeled into the world of the living. The existence of burial mounds is linked to the exercise of temporal power. Leaders and kings claimed legitimacy and authority by virtue of their descent from their founding forefathers. The burial mound was a physical memento of these founders and its presence on the land was a sort of posthumous envoy, sanctifying the present rule through its connection to the dead. The King would pass decrees and laws whilst seated on the burial mound, as though the final home of the dead was the ultimate metaphysical throne, channeling the spirit of the gods through those who are now closer to them. According to H. R. Ellis Davidson:

> In the Norse sagas a king claiming his inheritance might do so by sitting on his father's burial mound, and in some cases the king dispensed his royal power while sitting upon a grave-mound. These incidents, taken together with passages from the laws, show that it was common for the important family burial places to stand not far from the house, and of special importance was the mound of the founder of the family or first owner of the land, the *oðalshaugr*.[141]

As Freyr (and later Odin) sat on Hlidskjalf and gained knowledge of all nine worlds, so the King could sit on the burial mound and gain knowledge and authority from the other world. The use of the burial mound as a means of sanctifying the King's authority seems to have been long-lived. As late as the Civil War, King Charles was said to have addressed his troops from a burial mound next to Rykneld Street.

For the ancients, then, the dead were political and religious agents, in fact, the ultimate legislators. But over time, and especially following the conversion to Christianity, the burial mound began to take on sinister associations. It was still a place where the dead continued to exert agency, but whereas previously their presence was a necessary extension of the authority they had enjoyed whilst they were alive, the spread of Christianity demonized the burial mound and made it a place of ghosts and evil specters. In fact, prior to this shift in understanding caused by Christianity, the depiction of the dragon in *Beowulf* may already represent a tradition in decline. William A. Chaney, in his study of Anglo-Saxon kingship, muses on the meaning of the dragon banner: "Thus, when the dragon, related as it is to burial mounds, death, heroes, and the spirits of the great departed, fluttered over the Anglo-Saxon monarch, marking the king as his *regis insigne*, 'who knows', in the words of Professor Tatlock, 'what primitiveness may have been in the Anglo-Saxon mind?'"[142] A possible answer to this question is provided by Ellis Davidson. She points out that in *Beowulf*, the gold hoard is said to be the treasure of the last descendent of a great family. He himself hoards the treasure in a mound he has constructed. After his death, the dragon finds and takes possession of the hoard, guarding it for 300 years. "The account suggests that this is a rationalization of the idea (which would be repugnant to a Christian audience) that the dead man himself became a dragon. It is a familiar idea in Old Norse literature: Fafnir himself only turned into a dragon when he had gained possession of Andvari's treasure."[143]

Clearly, we have certain residues of ancient burial practices that are connected with ideas of ancestral authority and power. Whilst there may be some ambiguity concerning the place of inhumation burials versus cremation, there is no real paradox to the deeper meaning behind these practices. In the account of Freyr's death, cremation is abandoned as a practice because the Swedes believed that his continuing presence in the mound is responsible for their ongoing prosperity. In the tradition of cremation, the passage through fire indicates a transformation to an otherworldly status. In both cases, it is the continuing presence of the dead that is a common factor. Whatever local variations in practice may have occurred, it is clear that these funerary practices point to the ongoing agency of the dead in the affairs of the living.

The coming of Christianity necessitated a significant change in understanding. The new religion forbade cremation and insisted that the dead remained with God in heaven. This metaphysical screen that shut the dead off from the living also initiated a moral bifurcation in the Germanic mind. In line with the ideological program put forth by Pope Gregory of maintaining the places of

heathen worship whilst replacing the idols with Christian icons, many churches were built at the site of burial mounds. This was an appropriation of a numinous site by the new religion with the intention of maintaining the numinous force, but redirecting it to Christ. In this new metaphysical scheme, there could be no place for revenants of the ancestors remaining as connections with the otherworld. But this did not eradicate the belief in ghosts. What seems to have happened is that the burial mounds on the outskirts of communities became places of execution and burial grounds for criminals. As such places, which were often on borders and crossroads, became more extraneous to the community, so the spirits associated with those places became more demonized. In this way, the burial mounds that were chosen for appropriation by the Church continued to exert numinous power through the context of Christian worship, whilst those that were abandoned became unconsecrated ground associated with evil, and the numinous power emanating from them expressed itself in the form of demonic and terrifying spirits.

Not only did the conversion distance us from the ancestors, it also initiated a new hierarchy of the dead. Whereas previously, immortality was won through deeds and honorable living, with Christianity all that was needed was a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. This democratization of death created a new distinction between those who belonged to the new religion and those who did not. This distinction was more important (to the Church) than the traditional bonds of familial attachment, although in practice it seems that there was a stubborn clinging to the old ways as the practice of burial with the ancestors continued for some time after the conversion, despite the fact that the ancestors were “heathen.” In this context, those ghosts that interacted with the living would have increasingly been seen as evil and demonic entities barred from heaven, condemned to a purgatorial misery of quasi-corporeality, whilst the ancestors would have been residing with Christ in Heaven, distant and incorporeal.

It is from this bifurcation of the dead into incorporeal saintliness on the one hand, and bodily ghostliness on the other, that we derive our modern conception of the ghost. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to see the birth of the contemporary understanding of the ghost as being part of a greater tradition. If the modern conception of the ghost seems to begin with Shakespeare’s depiction of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, then it is certain that Shakespeare was drawing on other traditions that were themselves already ancient. It is widely known that in writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was drawing on an existing play, the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*. This *Ur-Hamlet* in turn was based on an account of Amleth given by Saxo Grammaticus in his twelfth century *Gesta Danorum*. In Saxo’s version,

Amleth returns from England and carries out a planned revenge on Feng, his stepfather and the killer of Amleth's father. When Feng and his men are asleep in the hall after a drunken feast, Amleth throws a wall tapestry over them and secures it to the floor so that they cannot escape. He then sets fire to the hall, killing everyone trapped inside. Following this, Amleth is installed as the rightful King and initiates a reign of peace and prosperity. Shakespeare erases most of the mythic content by making Hamlet doubt himself so that he cannot become the King of a new era. This "humanist" interpretation of the material is what makes the play seem as though it belongs to a properly modern audience, but the source material indicates that there are genuinely traditional motifs at work here.

The ghost of Hamlet's father walks around Elsinore seeking vengeance for his murder and hoping to reassert the correct order. By telling Hamlet (the Prince) that Polonius is his (the King's) murderer, he is acting as a source of authority from beyond the grave who establishes the legitimacy of his son as his rightful heir. This is exactly the role of the dead noted earlier in a pre-Christian context. Whilst it would appear that the ghost was not a part of the earlier Amleth story, but was instead an innovation of Shakespeare's, it is still the case that this innovation retains a great deal of genuinely ancient lore. As Catherine Belsey remarks:

> With or without theological endorsement, in other words, the walking dead continued to haunt the popular imagination. In *Why Shakespeare?* I put the case that the plays owe more than we have acknowledged to the tradition of winter's tales. These, rather than the officially sanctioned purgatorial narratives of the Catholic past, seem to me a more probable source of Shakespeare's ability to meet—and perhaps exceed—the expectations of his audience when it came to the introduction of a ghost. Old Hamlet does not request prayers for his soul: instead, he wants revenge, a demand for gratification scarcely likely to increase his chances of salvation.[144]

It is tempting to read this blending of traditional forms with individual innovations as an incipient form of post-modernism. But acting against this reading is the eerie fear evoked by the ghost. This uncanny feeling that is aroused by the sight of the walking dead cannot be reduced to one, single component interchangeable with many others. It is not a mere signifying motif. Instead, the dead King brings an existential dread, not just to Hamlet, but also to the audience, who are subliminally reminded of atavistic belief systems; of undead primordial revenants that lie dormant beneath the veneer of modernity.

On the one hand, the ghost in Hamlet is a huge step forward from theatrical conventions of the time which, in the manner of the morality plays, would depict posthumous characters as embodiments of single moral qualities (Folly, Conscience, Good Deeds, etc.). His very humanity accentuates the liminal tension of his alive/dead status. On the other hand, and as we have seen, the ghost also points back to more ancient notions that precede the moral imperatives of Christianity. On one level, he is the ghost of heathen belief that was supposed to have been laid to rest once and for all many centuries earlier.

If the spirit of Hamlet's father marks the beginnings of the modern literary ghost, then M. R. James undoubtedly marks its apotheosis. James' short stories articulate the modern ghost story proper, and it is notable that in this telling the ghost has lost his patriarchal role completely. What James expresses is the sense that the dead, insofar as they continue to haunt the living, are completely *other*. The sense of the uncanny, which teetered on a knife edge in *Hamlet*, has now firmly resolved itself to perceive the dead as wholly distinct and, in fact, repulsive. The ambiguity arising from the ghost's dual status in *Hamlet*, as both father and specter, both upholder of the right order and yet disrupter of the metaphysical order (between life and death), has now disappeared. The ghosts in M. R. James' stories are malevolent spirits tied in some way to a particular place, condemned to repeat autonomic patterns without a recognizable human agency.

In James' most famous tale, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," a young professor holidaying on the English east coast carries out a preliminary survey of a ruined site once belonging to the Knights Templar. In a small cavity, he finds buried a bronze whistle. The whistle bears a fragmentary Latin inscription translating as: "Who is this who is coming?" Blowing the whistle rouses the ghost, who pursues the young professor in a dream sequence. The ghost is incorporeal, being given form by "pale, fluttering draperies, ill-defined."[145] When the ghost is finally confronted in the flesh (so to speak), its significant feature is its "intensely horrible, face *of crumpled linen.*"[146] Its form deriving from a white bedsheet, this ghost is the exemplar of modern ghost stories.

The bedsheet ghost had already become known on the stage. The fully corporeal ghost (Hamlet's father is dressed in full armor) had become a clunky embarrassment as audiences came to expect something more ethereal and spooky from their ghosts. The etherealization of the ghost into pure spirit also marked the erasure of the ancestral linkage. These ghosts appeared less and less as recognizable dead relatives; instead, they were increasingly cast as malevolent spirits, divorced from an embodied sense of identity. Clearly, this shift signals

something of a crisis in our sense of lineage. With the rise of capitalism, the final victory of the Church's universalizing mission was achieved. Authority no longer derived from the ancestors, from a hierarchy of social classes, but instead from the new democratization effected by money. Partly, this explains the passing away of the ghost as a recognizable forebear. Put simply, in the new social conditions brought about by capitalism, the father's role had been usurped by capital; he could no longer return from the dead to re-establish the correct order because his authority was already subservient to the existing order. Here we begin to sense how ghosts were increasingly becoming a mere force of malevolence, a disrupter of the metaphysical order, but without a higher sense of order to justify their liminal intrusion into the rational world.

Something that has always been important in association with haunting, right from the time of burial mound construction, is the link that a ghost has to a particular place. There seems to be a persistent assumption that the ghost is in some sense trapped in a physical space, whether that be the burial ground or a site of particular emotional resonance. In his thoughtful and extensive reading of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Fredric Jameson insists on the necessary connection between the specific type of place where the haunting takes place and the structure of the community associated with that type of building:

> What is anachronistic about the ghost story is its peculiarly contingent and constitutive dependence of physical place and, in particular, on the material house as such. No doubt, in some pre-capitalist forms, the past manages to cling stubbornly to open spaces, such as a gallows hill or a sacred burial ground; but in the golden age of this genre, the ghost is at one with a building of some antiquity, of which it is the bad dream, and to whose incomprehensible succession of generations of inhabitants it makes allusion as in some return of the repressed of the middle-class mind. Not death as such, then, but the sequence of such "dying generations" is the scandal reawakened by the ghost story for a bourgeois culture which has triumphantly stamped out ancestor worship and the objective memory of the clan or extended family, thereby sentencing itself to the life span of the biological individual. No building more appropriate to express this than the grand hotel itself, with its successive seasons whose vaster rhythms mark the transformation of American leisure classes from the late 19th century down to the vacations of present-day consumer society.[147]

The Overlook Hotel, the setting for *The Shining*, is an emblematic site for haunting in late capitalism. It perfectly represents the bland and sterile form of

social relations that dominate in American consumerism and, additionally, it is a "home" without a recognizable lineage; all of its inhabitants are transitory and heterogeneous.

There is a disconcerting weight to the notion of history in *The Shining*. In Stephen King's book, the back story concerns the Torrance family having to downsize to a less desirable area due to the father being unable to hold down his teaching job as a consequence of his alcoholism. They find themselves living in an apartment on Arapahoe Street in an area occupied mostly by university students. It is because of the desperation of their situation, living in accommodation inappropriate for bringing up their young son, that Jack is compelled to take the caretaker's job at the Overlook. Even here, lying in the background of the main story, amongst the father's poorly repressed anger, is a subliminal reference to the Arapaho tribe that, not so long ago, were the inhabitants of the area. Nothing is made of this reference but, in a book that is so concerned with the immanent power of historical violence, it is another sedimentary layer of resonance. (This particular angle is pursued *ad absurdum* in the documentary about *The Shining's* obsessive fans, *Room 237*.)

In the midst of his ill-fated winter at the Overlook, Jack Torrance discovers a scrapbook in the basement. The book is filled with newspaper clippings chronicling the Overlook's history. It transpires that the hotel has changed hands many times in its history, the owners apparently finding it difficult to make a profit. At one time it appears to have been involved in illicit gambling and to have become enmeshed in organized crime. A triple shooting in the 1960s is clearly linked to this underworld activity, and there are also references to an apparent suicide. On top of this, at Jack's initial job interview the hotel manager confesses that the previous caretaker killed his two daughters and his wife before killing himself. Jameson rightly praises Kubrick for distilling this background material to a more focused and powerful essence:

> For where the novel stages the "past" as a babel of voices and an indistinct blast of dead lives from all the generations of historical inhabitants in the hotel's history, Kubrick's film fore-grounds and isolates a single period, multiplying increasingly unified signals: tuxedoes, roadsters, hipflasks, slicked-down hair parted in the middle . . . That generation, finally, is the twenties, and it is by the twenties that the hero is haunted and possessed. The twenties were the last moment in which a genuine American leisure class led an aggressive and ostentatious public existence, in which an American ruling class projected a class-conscious and unapologetic image of itself and enjoyed its privileges without guilt, openly and armed with its

> emblems of top-hat and champagne glass, on the social stage in full view of the other classes. The nostalgia of *The Shining*, the longing for collectivity, takes the peculiar form of an obsession with the last period in which class consciousness is out in the open: even the motif of the manservant or valet expresses the desire for a vanished social hierarchy, which can no longer be gratified in the spurious multinational atmosphere in which Jack Nicholson is hired for a mere odd job by faceless organization men.[148]

When, in the novel, Jack begins to read the scrapbook, he is struck by the weight of history the hotel brings with it and, more deeply, by the notion of history itself: "It seemed that before today he had never really understood the breadth of his responsibility to the Overlook. It was almost like having a responsibility to history . . . Suddenly it seemed that he could almost feel the weight of the Overlook bearing down on him from above, one hundred and ten guest rooms, the storage rooms, kitchen, pantry, freezer, lounge, ballroom, dining room . . ."[149] The caretaker's inventory of the hotel's interior is a nice illustration of the way in which the history of the Overlook begins to possess Jack. And, to be sure, this possession takes the form of a generalized sense of history imprinted and trapped within the labyrinthine structure of the grand hotel.

Where Jameson's analysis is most astute is in ascribing to *The Shining* (and particularly to the film version) the sense that haunting is essentially a process that becomes manifested externally through the "return of the repressed." This does not mean that the ghosts should be read as mere psychological projections; the ghosts in both the book and the film of *The Shining* appear to have a solid physical manifestation. Rather, they are revenants without a home and consequently without an identity, and as such they represent the repressed fact of the erasure of the self under capitalism. No wonder that the closing shot of the film shows Jack Torrance's doppelganger in an old photograph as though both men were simply interchangeable individuals without a greater contextualizing identity; in other words, as though they were atomized individuals without families, which, effectively, is their fate as menial employees working under the profit-driven imperatives of the hotel's owners. Unlike the pure spirits of M. R. James' tales, these are fully-present specters in a physical sense, but there is still a void where their identity should be. The ghosts of *The Shining* are all too real, but the solidity of their corporeal manifestation belies the ongoing erasure of authentic identity that continues apace in American life under capitalism.

In *The Shining*, the last vestiges of a recognizably European social order have

already disappeared; its fragmentary emblems echo along the bland walls of the Overlook to sinister effect. But there is no sense within the text (or in the film) that the spectral inhabitants of the Overlook represent something to be admired, apart from within the psychotic mind of Jack Torrance. And it is here that Jameson overstates his case. Compelled to interpret *The Shining* through a Marxist prism, he reads the 1920s ambience of the hauntings as a nostalgic yearning for a better world. But this lost world, as manifest within the Overlook, is malevolent and threatening. Certainly, Jack Torrance's complicity with the simmering malice of the hotel is a type of identification with a world that has disappeared entirely; but the presencing of the dead in the Overlook is a wholly disjunctive procedure. The ghosts of the Overlook have only a contingent link to the place: they were killed there. There is no *living* connection with the site as a numinous location. Any sense of nostalgia for the dead world rattling away within the Overlook's walls must reckon with the fact that it was already a rootless world.

In this way, the dead are uprooted from their resting place and denied an ancestral burial. An atomized people without a home (in the fullest sense of that word) will be haunted by restive ghosts, wandering aimlessly, and senselessly repeating their actions: the onset of spectral dementia.

This process of erasing the ancestral linkage receives a strange twist with the concept of hauntology. Hauntology derives from the rather turgid and impenetrable prose of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, wherein he argues for a fresh reckoning with the revolutionary potential of Marx so that Marxism will not become a matter of academic study but will return to its role as an urgent political program. In order to avoid the taming of the potential of Marxism, Derrida argues for a confrontation with the specters of Marx, that is, with the voices of Marx that can still be read into his work today in a deconstructivist fashion. Because the past is no longer present, it is necessary to engage with its voices through a method that recognizes its simultaneous presence non-presence: not ontology but hauntology. Rejecting Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history, Derrida argues that the past is always necessarily haunting the present and that to deny this fact is merely to substitute an illusion in place of a ghost. In an interesting note, he quotes from Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*:

> The faithful and the Church Fathers did not realize that by destroying belief in ghosts, they were also taking away the basis of religion, which left it floating, detached from the ground that nourished it. Whoever no longer believes in ghosts has only to pursue his unbelief to its conclusion to realize that there is no being hidden behind things, no ghost or—what comes down

> to the same thing if one understands the word in its naïve sense—"no spirit" . . . With ghosts, We enter into the realm of spirits, of *beings*.[150]

Derrida also discusses the spectral nature of the commodity. Any object, as soon as it becomes a commodity, is haunted by a ghostly doppelganger that represents (or embodies) its exchange value. A spade has a mere utility value if it is never an item of exchange. But as soon as it becomes a commodity, it also possesses (or is possessed by) an exchange value. Consider a spade with a gold handle and shaft. Its exchange value would be much greater than that of a normal spade, but not because of any difference in utility between the two. This exchange value haunts the commodity, but can never really be pinned down to particular existing qualities. (Much of contemporary art might illustrate the conundrum well.) The ghostly presence of this value is certainly real, but it cannot be ascribed a definite place within ontology. Its presence is best detected through hauntology.

Derrida engages in an extended discussion of Marx's illustration of the commodity character of a table. Whilst the table is basically matter, it is also at the same time an immaterial object in a way that suggests a form of animism: "The wood comes alive and is peopled with spirits: credulity, occultism, obscurantism, lack of maturity before Enlightenment, childish or primitive humanity. But what would Enlightenment be without the market? And who will ever make progress without exchange-value?"[151] What Derrida is getting at here is that all of these superstitious beliefs or practices are part of the mechanism of capitalism itself. Whilst the free market is always described in clinical, economic terms that suggest a post-Enlightenment degree of scientific rigor, the actual motivations behind exchange rely on superstitious projections about desire, happiness, and fulfilment. The ghost that haunts capitalism is the very pre-Enlightenment credulity that it appears to have exorcised. To put it in clear terms: is a world in which a Mark Rothko painting sells for $86 million a more rational world than one in which a system of kingship is operational? The point being that the present, however it is constituted, can never escape from certain irrepressible drives that will always intrude as ghostly agents. The apparent scientism of the market belies the primitive drives that animate it.

What hauntology demonstrates is that our conception of the dead has progressed a stage further. It would appear that in order for us to engage with the dead, now it is necessary to become like them. Hauntology represents an ontological erasure of the dead, but also of the living as well. By extending the concept of the spectral to all notions of exchange, we universalize the principle

that the ghost is the motor within otherwise dead matter. When we look at a photograph of a deceased relative, we feel that they still in some partial way exist for us. The photograph is a mere object of paper and light-sensitive chemicals, but in some way the presence of the dead haunts it. But who is it who is witness to this haunting? It is precisely the hidden being behind things, the animating presence, the ghost in the machine. This insubstantial self attaches itself to things, whether human or otherwise, and we experience all meaningful interaction within the "insubstance" of this self: a hauntological discourse amongst equally spectral entities.

The ancient conception of the dead involved their continuing to exert agency from beyond the grave and in this sense standing amongst the living as their equals. Now we are entering a phase where the living are mere hauntological shades, co-existing with the dead in their insubstantiality. Two very different states of equality. The story of the dead is a revealing tale of the way in which we view ourselves, and our current self-image is not flattering. In fact, like an undead vampire, when we look in the mirror, there is no reflection to look back at us.

There is some suspicion amongst Marxists regarding the legitimacy of Derrida's hauntological theorizing. For instance, Terry Eagleton perceives a duplicity of approach in *Specters of Marx*: "For what we have in this text, by and large, is a political discourse of an averagely-intelligent-layperson kind, and a philosophical rhetoric, of spectrality and the messianic, which is at once more subtle and a good deal less convincing. The two registers subsist cheek-by-jowl without ever adequately interacting; the former committed yet rather crude, the latter exciting yet evanescent."[152] It may well be a perceptive criticism, as hauntology has taken on a life of its own which seems to have distanced it from its Marxist origins.

Much of the interest in hauntology now seems to circulate around an interest in the idea of lost futures; the notion that the mid- to late-twentieth century seemed to be pointing towards particular versions of a technological future, but that those versions have now been abandoned. This is why futuristic music of the seventies and eighties can now sound so dated: it was invoking a future that never arrived. This is similar to science fiction films that now look amusingly kitsch in their futuristic depictions of the space-age. Much that passes for hauntology now consists of music that nostalgically samples or references certain outmoded sounds in order to establish a sense of an atemporal present. This has a real resonance because of the ubiquity of all past media now living a virtual (spectral) existence online. The ghosts of past nostalgias are evoked so

that they can come back to life in a present that seems at once omniscient and at the same time deeply bereft; in fact, in mourning.

But within this process of mourning it should be noted that the spectral equality apparent in the rehabilitation of once-lost forms can never be maintained as a formal equality. This is because nostalgia is mobilized as the primary motivating factor, and nostalgia is a very personal, very intimate emotion. Somewhat like sexual attraction, it cannot conform to pre-programmed notions of how it should behave; it is irrepressible. And, just as sexual attraction is the drive that guarantees the continuation of the lineage into the future, so mourning is the process whereby the lineage of the past is maintained. These impulses are primary and will override abstract ideals. If the present time gives us the equality of opportunity to choose our ghosts, it is self-evident that ancestor worship will begin to re-emerge into our future.

THE GREY WOOD

All roads lead to the burial mound. There it sits, a pregnant sarcophagus at the end of a life, casting a lunar shadow over talk and silence. Our happiness and sorrow; our births, our tears, our marriages; all take place in the burial mound's tenebrous arc. We might approach it on a Roman road running straight and true or on a winding country track; we might wander aimlessly down green lanes or stride purposefully along drovers' roads; we might speed along motorways beneath the false stars of sodium lamps. On asphalt or dirt track, whether overgrown with weeds or shining with dark rain: all roads lead to the burial mound.

The only memories we still have of the burial mound are residual, subliminal. Places were named after burial mounds: Drakelow, the barrow mound of the dragon; Harlow, the barrow mound of the army; Offlow, the barrow mound of Offa. But those meanings are now lost to us as, more often than not, are the mounds themselves which once were the sacred center for the people. Where the remains of a burial mound still exists, it will lie in a mute state of neglect; litter and dog shit the only votive offerings it now receives. And yet, if the inner eye can attune itself to the correct focus, all of the detritus becomes irrelevant. The burial mound once more emerges into sharp relief as the ultimate symbol of our predicament. It houses the long disappeared and yet remains as a symbol of their endurance, speaking to us in a strange tongue that tells of a world richer than our own. It stands for our borderline condition, each of us a brief nexus, both inheritor and progenitor.

For centuries, the new religion sought to exorcise the ancestors from the psyche of the land. What had once been a site of special sanctity became a place for outlaws, a cursed place fit for executions. The old gods were turned into monsters and demons, and the burial mound became a place of the devil. Despite the cruel distortions of Christianity, it must be admitted that its influence allowed the burial mound to retain a supernatural cachet; a continuation of the numinous by other means. Now the burial mound suffers from indifference and apathy, and we are a people incapable of staring death in the face.

There are burial mounds hidden across the face of the ancient Kingdom of Mercia. Those few that survived the erosion of agriculture, theology, and industrialization are mostly pitiful relics. They sit low in a built-up, urban landscape, their intended topographical prominence now a sad joke. Churches

and houses dwarf the mounds, and roads throttle and choke them. They can still transmit a special significance to cartophiles, identified on Ordnance Survey maps as visible earthworks, their symbol a star. But otherwise the burial mound is a forgotten monument, an unknown vessel. It speaks to us of a world where the dead are still present, but the melancholy fact is that we do not want to hear what it has to say.

JULY 917

The old Roman road, Watling Street, cuts across the breadth of the Mercian kingdom. Here, in the year 917, Æðelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, marched with an army to Tamworth. They came from Tettenhall, a town that Æðelflæd had liberated from the Danes seven years earlier. Then, she had fortified the town in the way that her father had perfected in his great battles against the Danes, when Æðelflæd was a girl. It was her first visit to Tettenhall since then, and she had been received there with all of the honor that a queen would have expected. But Æðelflæd could not take the title "queen" for political reasons. Mercia had now lost some of the power it had held under the glory days of Penda and Offa and, whilst it was still an important kingdom in its own right, Æðelflæd had to keep in mind her father's vision of the English kingdoms united under one king. In pursuit of this vision she was joined with her brother, Edward, who was engaging the Danes in East Anglia. If Æðelflæd had taken the title "queen," it might have seemed that she was attempting to augment a sense of growing Mercian power, and it could cause a fatal rivalry with her brother. Although she was loyal to her father's vision, she had to be careful not to enflame the pride of her own people too much. Neither Mercia nor Edward's Wessex could afford to lose each other's support. If England could become united, it would mean an end to the constant Danish incursions, and it would secure her island borders forever. Everything Æðelflæd lived for could potentially be achieved within her lifetime.

But that didn't make it any easier to forgo the royal title that her people were so eager to bestow upon her. At Tettenhall they had lined the road as she entered the town, and shouts welcoming "Queen Æðelflæd" followed her all the way. When she sat in the mead hall for the day's formal affairs and the evening's social entertainment, she was continually and reverentially addressed as "my Queen." She could hardly be angry with her subjects for showing their high regard for her in such a deferential manner, but it did make it more difficult for her to accept that she should officially hold no title higher than "Lady."

Now, as they neared Tamworth, she forced such thoughts aside. She would need to gather more warriors there to join her growing *fyrd* army. From

Tamworth they would march to Derby, where they would meet the Danes in battle. Her brother was defending recently-built fortifications in East Anglia from Danish attack, and Æðelflæd was intending to engage the Danes at their Derby stronghold so that their forces would be stretched. If the tactic worked, it would see the Danes fatally weakened and would give the tantalizing prospect of a united England. Failure would leave open the prospect of the Danes moving even further into English territory and undoing all of her father's successes. The very idea of a Danish victory seemed to fly in the face of God's providential plan for the English, but these were strange and difficult times. The heathen banner was a commonplace in Northumbria and had been so as far south as Watling Street until very recently. There were worrying suggestions coming to Æðelflæd that her own people were starting to doubt the Christian message; that the success of the Danes was causing a revival of the old ways in some of the smaller hamlets. Æðelflæd was not unduly concerned, though. She suspected that the supposed revival of the old ways was actually nothing more than their continuation in a residual form. The priests were always spooked by the sort of things that real people outside monasteries got up to. The English year was a stable part of the people's lives and they clung to folk customs and superstitions as any farming community would. Æðelflæd understood enough that she could sense the deeper rhythms that pulsed through the liturgical calendar.

There were murmurings coming from the front of the convoy. Æðelflæd's travelling companion, Cenwulf, jogged ahead to see what was going on. By the time he returned, the murmurings had turned into loud and relieved greetings. There appeared to be another welcoming party awaiting Æðelflæd, although they were still some hours from their destination.

JULY 2010

The morning was bright with the false promise of a midsummer day. Edward looked out of the passenger window of his father's old car at the drab landscape of shops and houses passing by. The noise generated by the car made it difficult to conduct a conversation without shouting, and Edward was content to sit in silence.

He was still unsure whether he should have gone along with his father's suggestion that morning. When he had been asked if he wanted to visit the site of the Staffordshire Hoard's burial, he had agreed immediately, and with some enthusiasm. Edward was one of the thousands who had queued for hours to see some of the newly-discovered artifacts when they had initially been exhibited in Birmingham.

The exhibition had been strange. It was odd enough in Edward's experience to

have to queue outside a museum for so long in order to see a display, but when so many of the objects displayed were still caked in soil it lent an air of urgency to what was being viewed; a sense that this was a fresh unearthing. And the artifacts themselves, which so many people had queued to see, glittered from a different world. Pieces of gold weaponry ripped from their casements, gleaming, garnet-decorated, shining red and golden, patterned with bold, complex, interlaced symbols, speaking from another age of heroism, of bloodshed and of unimagined treasure. Sword pommels, sword pyramids, pieces of helmet, small, mysterious golden serpents: a fantasy world of magic and strength extracted from the soil of Mercia.

Edward had just started his second year at college when the Hoard was discovered, and the mystique surrounding it had augmented his decision to continue studying history at university. The proximity of the Hoard to his home had excited him in ways he could not articulate to anyone. He became suddenly aware that the brick and concrete, asphalt and tarmac, world he lived in was but a temporary outgrowth from something ancient, verdant, and strange. He would walk his streets and roads with an uncanny sense of identity with those who had walked there before. It was not exactly a feeling that he was in the presence of spirits or ghosts, but he was often losing himself in daydreams of the past, and a sharp awareness that those long-dead people had walked this road or farmed this street would sometimes possess him. Thus had he become reacquainted with a childish sense of awe and excitement for the past.

The car joined traffic heading north on Chester Road. As he sat next to his father, watching the drab world pass by, Edward's excitement was becoming tempered by suspicion.

"How do you know where it was buried? I thought the site was kept secret."

"It was kept secret. At least while they were still digging stuff from the ground, it was kept secret. They couldn't let on what they were doing or it would have all been nicked. But everyone who lives around there knows where it was. You just need a little inside knowledge."

"Is this 'inside knowledge' something that you were told by a bloke in the pub?"

His father snorted a suppressed laugh. "Don't knock it, Ed. I know a chap who lives in Brownhills. He knows the farmer whose land it was found on. Everyone there knows exactly where they dug it up. Actually, he tells me it's barely inside the Staffordshire border at all. Some people are a bit pissed off about it. They think it should have been called the Brownhills Hoard."

Edward looked through the window, far from convinced.

His father parked in an empty road that was blocked off almost as soon as it

started by a gate with a number of cardboard security warnings tied to it. “See? The farmer’s got money to spend now. He’s got a security company to keep trespassers out.” They left the car and walked back along the main road, above which a grass ridge rose to a fence. Edward’s father climbed the ridge, and Edward followed. At the top they stood and looked over a fence into a muddy field with a few horses chewing hay. Further down, the traffic on the A5 was noisily apparent. The sky was a grey-white slate of cold cloud, pregnant with rain. There was nothing compelling about this place.

“How do you know this is the right field? It doesn’t feel right.”

“He told me to park the car where the road was blocked off. The field is between there and the A5. What do you mean it doesn’t feel right?”

“I don’t know. There’s no atmosphere here. It’s not a . . . what are you doing?” Edward’s father had climbed over the fence and was walking across the field. “Come on, Ed. I think I can see where it is.”

“But what about the security company?”

“Oh, those signs are just for show, just to scare people off.”

“But you said he was paying a security company. Dad!” But his father was out of earshot. Edward looked around and saw plenty of cars driving past. Some of the drivers were looking at him. If anything, he was more conspicuous standing where he was than he would have been in the field. He climbed over the fence and joined his father.

“This is it. Look.” The patch of ground his father stood on sat slightly lower than its surroundings, and the grass grew less profusely. The depressed area was clearly rectangular and stood out when viewed closely. “Well, I admit it does look like it could have been dug up,” Edward conceded. He looked around at the horizon. A church peaked through the trees from the other side of the M6 toll road. Another building, whitewashed and anachronistic, sat not far from it. The roads: the A5; the M6 toll; and Barracks Lane where they had parked, all generated a constant and diabolical roar. It was the sound of a dirty and soulless demon, invoked by the age, possessing all engines. A mist of cold drizzle appeared.

Edward’s father had lit a cigarette and was pacing around the putative pit, pointing with his smoking hand. “This would make sense. They buried it at the top of this mound. From here you get a view of all of the surrounding land. Like a hill fort. This would’ve been a sacred site.”

“But the whole point was to bury the treasure so it couldn’t be found. Why would they choose an exposed site? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Hidden in clear view. You never heard of that?”

“What do you mean, sacred site?”

“Maybe it was put in this spot for a reason. Maybe it wasn’t just buried to keep it hidden.”

“So why was it buried?”

“I don’t know. I have to admit that. But don’t you sense something here? That this is an important place?”

Edward looked around the field, and he looked at the land surrounding the field. The demented roar of the traffic was unabated. The cold drizzle continued with no consideration. The grey horizon backgrounded the indifferent horses and their hay, their shit. It didn’t feel like an important place. And yet, an odd and unsettling sensation tingled at the back of Edward’s mind. It was too deep to achieve any sort of articulation but, like a repressed memory, the ripples of its submersion lapped at the shores of his thought. “No, I don’t sense anything. Can we go home now, it’s raining?”

An insistent barking interrupted them. Emerging over the descent that hid the far side of the field, a man in a t-shirt being pulled by a noisy dog with rounded eyes and white teeth came towards them.

“Is that a pit bull? Or a Staffs? Are they illegal?”

“At least it’s on a lead. Listen, Dad, just do what he says. I don’t want any trouble.”

“Don’t worry, Ed, it’s just a misunderstanding.”

“This is private property.” Bark, bark, bark.

“Yes, sorry. Is it? Oh, well we are just sightseers, you see. Amateur historians, if you like. We have an interest, you see . . .”

“This is private property.” Bark, bark, bark.

The dog, a compact fist of muscle, stood on its hind legs supported by its strangling lead. Its anger was endless. Its small, black front paws waved in the air like a toy boxer.

“Yes, I see. We were just hoping . . .” Bark, bark, bark. “Due to the importance, you see, of the significance, the potential significance, I should say, of the site . . .”

Bark, bark, bark. “This is private property.” Bark, bark, bark.

“Maybe if we just go back over the fence we could discuss it?” Edward and his father kept the distance between themselves and the insane dog as they backed away to the fence. They climbed over, this time with no debate. When they turned to look at the dog and its human companion, they saw that the man was walking away, dragging the dog, still eager for a kill, with him.

“So much for ‘no security’!”

“Ed, look at the sign.” His father walked several yards along the elevated verge to one of the posters they had seen earlier. “This sign is for a legit

company. That tosser isn’t a security guard!”

“So what? The land owner’s paying some local guy a few quid to keep people out of the field.”

“No, there’s something else going on. If he’s already paying for security he wouldn’t pay someone else to do it unofficially.”

“Shall we run after him and ask him about your theory?”

“No need to be daft, Ed.”

“You started it. I’ve come to see the field, so thanks for that. Can we go home now?”

“This is the trouble. You have no sense of curiosity. You take everything for granted, you don’t question things enough.”

“I do question things; I question most things that you say. That’s what you don’t like.”

“Hm. Don’t you think there’s anything odd about this setup? A skinhead with a Rottweiler guarding an archaeological excavation? Does that sound plausible?”

“Given the fact that it’s just happened, then, yes, it sounds completely plausible.”

They looked past each other into different distances. The barking no longer interrupted the sound of traffic. “I just think that there could be some sort of story here. I mean, it’s so close to where we live, I know this area. This could really mean something. Everything else is breaking up all around us. We’re nothing special.”

“Maybe it’s just you who’s breaking up. Do you ever think about that? Maybe if you kept it all in instead of trying to drag everyone else down, you could just have your breakdown in peace, and I could get on with my life.”

“I’ve already had my breakdown; no need for me to go back there.”

“But you do! All the time! Can’t you ever break out?”

“Break out of what, Ed? I’m trapped in here.” He tapped the side of his head, pointedly.

Edward strode back to the car directly, with some disciplined purpose. His father kicked weeds, sending umbrellas of pollen on their fertile flight. The damp in the air had become oppressive, if not tangible. The sky had become shifting currents of grey, each one enfolding another in a cold dance. Cars continued to pass uninterrupted. Their drivers and passengers looked at the pedestrians on the embankment as though they were outlaws. One or two vehicles had set wipers on a slow setting, clearing the damp, but their noise could not be heard above the constant drone.

Edward’s father arrived back at the car, dragging his feet. Edward waited.

“Look at this.” Edward’s father was pointing at something with his

outstretched foot. “It’s coming through, breaking the surface.” Edward looked down and saw a blue flower growing in a crack in the black asphalt. Its tiny petals looked dry and careworn, but its existence was unarguably a triumph of nature. “It just goes to show, doesn’t it? It doesn’t matter how much we concrete over everything, the weeds will keep breaking it apart. We can’t keep doing it forever. Nature will win in the end.” He picked the flower and tossed it to the breeze. They got into the car and drove home.

July 917

Aethelfaed was not addressed as “Queen,” nor cheered when she reached the welcoming party. The six men greeted her heartily enough, but it was apparent that something was troubling them. Thegn Beorhtwald spoke for the men. “We know that you still have miles to travel before you reach Tamworth, but there is something that we feel you would wish to see. It sits next to the Roman road on this side of the grey wood. We thought you might like to stop briefly to see it.”

“You mean to say you are not just eager to greet me, Beorhtwald?”

“That, too, of course, Lady Æðelflæd.” Then, he seemed to remember himself, “Queen Æðelflæd.”

“Well, let’s get on, then. You know that you’ve got me intrigued.”

They walked further along Watling Street. To the right of the road, at the head of a small incline, another group of men formed a circle. They stood on a mound. “Is that a heathen barrow?” asked Æðelflæd.

“It is, Lady.” The travelers walked up to the small circle of men. The mound on which they stood was just at the edge of a dense wood. As Æðelflæd approached, the circle opened. On the ground was a highly polished quartz jewel, four or five inches across, cut into a polyhedral shape. Its violet tones caught what there was of the dim sun and it glittered like stained glass on a summer’s day. “What is this, Beorhtwald?”

“A dragon’s hoard. At least that’s what the folk will make of it if they find out.”

“Yes, yes. But what is it exactly?”

“We have no idea. A merchant saw it when he was travelling home a few days ago. He was going to take it, but he says that a horrible feeling came over him when he tried to pick it up. Then he realized that it was probably because it was cursed. We told him that we would come to look at it.”

“And have you picked it up yet? To see if you also get a strange feeling?”

“Lady Æðelflæd, I am a good Christian man. And as a humble servant of Christ I have nothing to fear from curses or any other superstitions.”

“I am delighted to hear that. I have heard talk of the old heathen ways

returning to this area of Mercia. I need to know that I have strong Christian men defending the faith here."

"Yes, indeed, Lady."

"And yet I sense that no one has actually been bold enough to handle the object. Am I right?"

The men looked at each other uneasily. "The truth is, Lady," began Beorhtwald, "that this area beyond the grey wood has never been a hospitable place. Travelers never linger here. It has always been a border area. The old Welsh tribes lingered here for a long time after our people settled in the Trent valley. And of course it has always been rumored that King Penda had good relations with them. Much too good, if half of what I have heard is to be believed."

"And what have you heard, Beorhtwald?"

"People have always said that King Penda had more in common with the heathen Welsh than with the Christian English. There are stories passed down of him travelling through the grey wood to meet the old heathen tribes and perform barbarous acts. In any case, this place is too far out from the town. It feels like enemy territory. No one likes it here."

Æðelflæd bit her tongue. It would have been cheap and unproductive to make a comment about these strong Christian defenders of the faith being scared by an old burial mound in an obscure place. She knew full well that there were plenty of reasons why these fears and superstitions persisted, and she also knew that many of them were far from empty. Instead, she said, "Actually, I am descended from Penda. Did you know that?"

"I did not, Lady. I apologize, I meant no offense."

"None taken. But it's true. Well, as far as I can tell, it's true. Ancestry is a murky business when you get beyond living memory. My mother, Eahlswith, as you know, came from Mercian royalty. She told me that she could trace her line back to Penda. The man may have been an unforgivable heathen, but he was a fierce Mercian ruler and a good king."

"I could not disagree with that, Lady. And you certainly take after King Penda in those respects."

"It's kind of you to say so, Beorhtwald. But how come this jewel is sitting on the ground here alone? Was your merchant a grave robber who got scared and ran off?"

"No, Lady. He travels this road regularly. He is an honest sort, for a merchant. I believe he was telling the truth."

"So he must have come along after someone else had started to steal the grave goods. Is that it?"

“That’s what we assumed, Lady. But we can’t find any evidence of digging around here. That’s what we were looking for when we spotted you approaching.”

Some of Æðelflæd’s men had already started walking around the mound, scuffing the ground with their boots. The jewel sat shining and silent.

“Cenwulf,” called Æðelflæd, “what do you make of this? Should I be scared of dragons or thieves?”

19 August 2010

Sarah and Edward sat on the floor of his bedroom, listening to music. An opened and nearly empty bottle of wine sat between them. Without the music there would have been too much silence.

“I’m happy for you. I really am.”

“You don’t sound it.”

“No, but really . . . It’s a change.”

“Yeah. I suppose it will be. But you finish next year. And I’ll be back for the holidays.”

“Ed, how can we have a relationship if we just see each other in the holidays?”

“Lots of people do it.”

“No, lots of people try to do it and split up. You’re starting a new life. I am happy for you.”

“It doesn’t need to be the end of anything.”

“No.”

Sarah poured some more wine for herself, emptying the bottle.

“I just . . . it’s . . .”

“Look, it’s only Nottingham. It’s not that far away. About an hour on the train.”

“More like an hour and a half.”

“Not quite.”

“And not exactly cheap.”

“But we can still do it. I can come back here for weekends, and you can visit me for weekends. We can still do it, Sarah. It doesn’t have to be the end of things.”

“No. And I am really happy for you. Straight As. Why does it matter that I finish next year?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said that I finish next year. Why is that relevant?”

“Well, you can apply to Nottingham, then it means that we’ll only have a year

doing the weekend visits."

"So you've already decided which uni I'm going to?"

"That's not what I meant."

"So what did you mean?"

"You're worried that my going to Nottingham will split us up. I'm just saying that it needn't."

"Not if I follow you around wherever you choose to go, you mean?"

"So what do you want? Do you want me to not accept Nottingham? To not go to uni at all?"

"Course not."

"So what then?"

"Don't know."

"It needn't be the end of things."

"No."

Sarah finished her wine and stood up. Edward did the same and turned the CD off. He still had the child's alarm clock his mother had given to him when he was at primary school, and it now ticked loudly in the newly-created silence.

"We should go out. My parents are expecting me to celebrate."

"How is your dad?"

"Crap, as always."

"Well, send him my regards. I'll text you."

"Wait, we're going out, aren't we?"

"I don't really feel like it. My period."

"Aw, come on!"

"Don't, Ed. We'll have to see. But I'm not feeling good right now."

"Just come for one drink?"

"I need to get home. I'm not feeling too good."

"I don't think I'm feeling too good anymore."

"I'm sorry, Ed. And I am happy for you."

"Then celebrate with me."

"I'll text you. Goodbye."

"Bye."

July 917

"I can't see any sign of digging, Lady. Perhaps a fox found the jewel somewhere else and carried it here," Cenwulf replied. "There are said to be other, lost burials around here. Ancient, royal burials filled with riches."

"So, lots of stories but no facts. It seems this pretty jewel is a mystery. Beorhtwald, tell me about these other royal burials of which Cenwulf speaks."

“There is really little else to add, Lady. There are stories handed down which are said to be from the first Mercian settlers of this area. They say that the Welsh who lived here were easily driven out of the land around Tamworth, but that they would fight fiercely to the death if any approaches were made into this area. They had superstitious, heathen beliefs about this area being sacred. There are said to be barrows of ancient kings and queens, now lost to time, in which the riches of the Welsh were deposited.”

“Yet the Mercians were not the first to take on the Welsh here. The Roman road, Watling Street, runs right through here.”

“Yes, Lady, and there is a Roman town a couple of miles further on. But the Romans left here before the Welsh did.”

Æðelflæd turned around to view the landscape. They were standing on an incline that gave a good view of the surrounding land, but there was not a great deal to see. Watling Street heading east disappeared into the closely twisted grey wood. To the north and further in the distance, another dense wood rose on a hillside. The sky was low and dark; the sun pale and withdrawn. She could see no smoke rising from farmsteads. Æðelflæd drew her coat more closely to her chest. A crow sang of death somewhere nearby.

“Lady, we should perhaps be on our way. We must reach Tamworth before nightfall.”

Æðelflæd bent down and took the jewel into her hands. Somehow it seemed to catch the sunlight and refract it through its polished edges. She brushed some of the clinging dirt from it and looked into its heart. Its clouded innards meshed to a final translucence, and a cold, distant ingress of the Sun bled out. Æðelflæd thought that she caught her own reflection in one of the surfaces. Then, other reflections; reflections of people who were not there. She saw her brother, Edward. Edward who was carrying out a twin military campaign in Wessex, and whose success would lead to a belittling of her own position. Her dear brother who was fulfilling her father’s destiny. And she also saw the reflection of her father, Alfred. Eighteen years dead now, and she still felt his presence by her side every day. He had taught her that life was a means to something greater. Æðelflæd felt the force of history in her blood, but she knew that she would have to chill her own ambitions to deliver victory to her father’s vision. Their reflections stood on either side of Æðelflæd’s on the shining surface of the jewel. She turned her head from the jewel’s tricks and looked around, but no one was standing behind her. Yet, looking once more into the jewel, she still stood with her father and brother. As she looked at the images, the three figures seemed to resolve into one.

As though compelled by an animating presence Æðelflæd closed her eyes. She

saw deeper into the heart of the jewel.

December 2010

The snow began as the train pulled in to Birmingham New Street. Tiny white wasps swarmed in cold gusts. By the time they had driven home from the station, it was starting to settle on the ground in a thin, wet, hesitant gauze. Edward and his father both carried his luggage into the house.

Christmas decorations had been put up half-heartedly and without imagination. Their cheap glitter gave off no warmth. Edward went up to his room and noticed that his mother had moved some of his things around. He realized that this was no longer his home in the same way that it had been for all of his life up to that point. Something had shifted.

He unpacked his things and wrapped up the two gifts that he had bought for his parents, both of them chosen in a rush on his way to the train station.

The doorbell rang. By the time he had walked downstairs, his father had let Sarah in, and they were both sat in the living room.

“Hi, Sarah. Shall we go, then?”

His father replied to him, “You’ve only just got here, Ed. How about chatting for a few minutes?”

“Well, we’ve got to meet some people. Better get going.”

“We’ve got plenty of time,” Sarah said. Then, addressing Edward’s father, “How have you been keeping?”

“Very well, actually. I’ve been doing some research on the site of the Staffordshire Hoard.”

“I’m sure Sarah doesn’t want to hear about all that, Dad.”

“Actually I would,” Sarah insisted. “What sort of research?”

Edward lingered by the living room door, hoping that this wouldn’t take long. His father was spreading maps and notes over the coffee table and floor. “You’ve heard about the hoard, Anglo-Saxon gold and jewels?”

“Of course, it was all over the news last year.”

“Well, what they haven’t told you is that the site it was buried in was significant.”

“Actually, we’ve been there and it isn’t significant at all,” Edward interjected.

“Where was it buried?” asked Sarah. Edward gave up and slumped ostentatiously into an armchair. His father picked a map up from the floor. “This is the field it was found in, just by the M6 toll road. It’s about ten miles to the west of Tamworth, which was an Anglo-Saxon capital. The field is next to the A5, which was Watling Street in Roman times. Now look at this.” A photocopy of another map was produced. “This is the stretch of Watling Street on an old

map. Here, just down from the hoard field, was a burial mound called Knaves Castle. Now," switching back to the first map, "the burial mound was destroyed years ago. But it would have been here. And this road runs from Knaves Castle up to an Iron Age hill fort, Castle Ring. Look how it runs exactly on a north-south axis."

Edward came to look at the map. "It doesn't even join up those two points. It only runs part of the way."

"But this is just the modern road that was built on older trackways. You can see the course of the road and where it ends here," he said, pointing to the map. "If you follow its course, then it does join up the burial mound and the hill fort."

"You're right, it does," said Sarah.

"And the A5, Watling Street, runs exactly east to west along this particular stretch, past Knaves Castle burial mound and the field where the hoard was buried. For about three miles. So you have two ancient roads, both running dead straight for miles and crossing at an ancient burial mound. One is aligned exactly east-west, the other north-south."

"So what does it mean?" Sarah asked.

"It doesn't mean anything," Edward cut in. "If you look anywhere that's been inhabited for so long, you're bound to find loads of burials and pathways. It doesn't mean anything."

"Well, you could be right if it weren't for the fact that this area is known to have had a heathen temple in it. About 5 miles to the east, there's a little place called Weeford. In Old English that means 'heathen temple by the ford.' So there certainly was Anglo-Saxon heathen worship carried out in this area. It's basically a huge sacred site."

"This is Brownhills we're talking about, right?" Edward asked unhelpfully. But Sarah was interested. "So you think that all that stuff was buried in a sacred site? What for?"

"Maybe it was an offering to the gods. I'm not really sure, but I did find a local history book that says something interesting." Edward's father rifled through several scrappy pieces of paper. "Here it is. Now, the oldest part of Brownhills is called Catshill. The quote I found is, 'Catshill itself has been the source of much conjecture. The name may be derived from "Canute's Hill," which parallels the theory that Cannock itself embodies Canute's name, and also ties in with persistent rumors of buried kings and hidden treasure which attach themselves to Catshill.' So, there were already local legends of buried treasure. There's something about this area."

"Everywhere has legends and stories. It doesn't make it true."

"Of course not. But put all the different pieces together and it starts to make

sense. Look, this place I mentioned, Weeford: I found an article about the name. In Old English it was *Weohford*. *Weoh* is a term for heathen temple, but there was another word that was used as well: *hearg*. Now, according to this article the *weoh* temples were located at the edge of the tribal territory, the *hearg* temples at the center. So, the ones at the edges became more and more associated with evil, devil worship, that sort of thing. They were the places where executions were carried out. Weeford would have been right at the edge of the English territory, bordering the Welsh. And it's even older than that. Earlier on, the border between the Cornovii and the Corieltauvii was in exactly this area. Now look at the OS map. This is the field where the hoard was found. And look: this dotted line running down the road next to it. It's the County Constituency boundary, the Borough Constituency boundary, and the Metropolitan Borough boundary. The point is that this place is still a place of borders." He folded up the map and put it down. "These things always go back centuries; boundaries are preserved for generations."

"Well, that much I do agree with," said Edward.

"So," said Edward's father, "that's where I had got to. I'm convinced that this whole area has a history of pagan worship. It's a sacred site. And I've just got more confirmation. I had to pay to get this from the British Library. It's a copy of the field report done by the archaeologist who excavated the site. Apparently, they found evidence that there may have once been a burial mound on the exact spot where the hoard was found. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"This is amazing," Sarah said, looking at the maps spread carelessly around the room. "I mean, you should get this published or on the TV or something. I'd love to go there and look at those places."

"Come on, then," said Edward's father, getting to his feet. "I'll take you there now."

"No way," Edward began. "We're going out tonight."

"Yes," Sarah interjected. "We're going to see all this stuff that your dad's been researching. It's amazing."

"No, it's not. I've been there. It's just a field covered in horse shit."

"You're supposed to be a historian now," Edward's father said. "You should be interested in all this."

"No, I'm interested in actual history. You know, things that actually happened. Not just made-up stories."

"Oh, come on, Ed, I really want to see this. Your Dad has come up with something incredible here. Let's go, I really want to see it." Sarah was already following Edward's father to the front door, leaving Edward with little choice but to follow her.

Outside, the snow was settling, steadily growing thick like skin. The sky was a slate sketch in watercolor, full and already darkening with winter haste. The cold had got inside everyone. Edward recalled his father taking him on the same journey in the summer and the monotonous flow of drab buildings rolling past the window. Now, the snow had transformed everything, hiding the ugliness and cleansing the grey urban mess. Edward looked out at a purified world whilst his father spoke of borders and boundaries and the Cornovii. The snow was settling everywhere except for the road where the endless cars swept it away and made the asphalt glisten wet like a black river.

Edward's father pulled up and parked in the same place where they had parked that summer. The sky had now become fully night, but the self-generating glow emitted by the snow lit everything with its diffuse nimbus.

They left the car and walked back to where a high ridge left the road. They climbed it by planting their feet in the snow at an angle, creating steps. At the top of the ridge, Edward's father brushed snow from the top of the fence and clambered over. He helped Sarah over and then Edward as well. They walked to the area of the field that had borne signs of excavation some months earlier. As they walked, the snow compacted and spoke beneath their feet. Theirs were the first footprints in this new snow, leading to the site of an ancient buried hoard. They stood in the falling snow, looking across the A5 to the white hills in the near distance. The white snow was covering everything, but its effect was to reveal rather than to conceal. The more it fell, the more the ephemeral, the accidental, and contingent passed into forgetfulness, and the more the enduring and essential made themselves manifest. The land was revealed as a deeper chorographic presence, its solid mass printing the same shapes onto the horizon as it had for generations. The smaller cycles faded away as a greater pulse beat from the heart of the land.

The stars were hidden, but the night was filled with dancing snow. No words were spoken, and for a brief, passing moment, all three felt a stillness within. And the blood music played its silent song.

About the Author

Christopher Pankhurst's writings on music, the visual arts, literature, religion, folklore, occultism, philosophy, and politics have appeared in Counter-Currents/*North American New Right*, *Helios*, *Black Gnosis*, and the *Thoughts and Perspectives* series. *Numinous Machines* is his first book.

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