



Journeys of the learning soul:  
Plato to Descartes

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by

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to build up a picture of what it has meant for us within the western canon to educate a human being through the depths and heights of existence. It uses narrative accounts of educational journeys from ancient, medieval and early modern sources to develop an integral picture of the spectrum of education along with the techniques and fore-structures needed to guide a student through the various stages and encounters. Key metaphors, journeys and relationships – Diotima’s ladder of beauty, Plato’s cave, Philo’s Abraham and Sarah, Origen’s bride and Bridegroom, Plotinus’ journey of the alone to the Alone, Augustine’s Confessions, the tragic love of Abelard and Heloise, Dante’s encounters in the infernal, purgatorial and paradisaical realms of human experience, Shakespeare’s great playing within the same realm, and Descartes’ doubting genius – provide a rich ensemble, each resonating with the next, opening out intellectual, affective, volitional, and imaginative paths through the full terrain of human existence. This multi-dimensional approach points towards a flexible and insightful pedagogics that works with the enormous variety and capacity of human learning rather than heavy-handedly insisting on one path, or, even worse, not recognizing and dealing with specific areas of human living that occur in the upper and lower reaches of our educational endeavours. Phenomenological, Hermeneutic and Integral methods suggested by Heidegger and Wilber amongst others were used to inform the process of research. The results of this thesis are not contained in its recommendations but in the effects of its reading. It is itself a tool that embodies and encourages the principles of an educational tradition that has existed within the history of western learning, not seeking a return to ancient or medieval ways but to provide a backlight that assists current initiatives working with the full range of human potential.

## Preface

I began this thesis as a part of the wounded in teaching, bruised by the continual repetition it demands and caught in its trenches. I end it as one who now longs to enter the calling with both a prophetic and poetic voice. There are many who have helped me along this way:

Pam, who taught me how to live and love in the midst of intellectual labour;

Dad, who has lived what I have written;

Pat, who has quietly given me complete confidence that this project is possible and for the intellectual companionship along the way;

The Council of Scientific Development for having kindly funded this project for three years;

The Education Department of Rhodes University for allowing me the space to engage in such a project and forgiving my foibles.

## **Dedication**

To my mother who gave me pure love in her dying

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis stems from the desire to tell a story, an educational story that will captivate, enchant, instruct and deepen the reader's appreciation of what it means to educate. Nine stories are told in all, involving ladders of beauty, caves of shadows, seductions of teachers, impotent husbands and barren wives, dark brides and disappearing bridegrooms, kisses of the mouth, journeys of lonely souls into the Great Alone, confessions of lust, breakdowns of will, agonizing love letters, sickening pride, travels into hell and heaven, terrible rape, murder and suffering, heart breaking attempts to protect the purity of love, quiet resting after massive tempests, raging doubt, evil demons, and happy endings. All is directed to one purpose, a celebration of what it has meant for us in the west to educate in all its complex variety and beauty. Each story resonates with the next, and as they intersect, a bigger picture slowly unfolds of an integral educational process of great depth and height. To keep the actual text as close as possible to a narrative form I have resorted to using fairly extensive footnotes where academic elaboration, justification or clarification were deemed necessary. Finally, poetry, image and song were mixed in to help the text resound. Yet throughout I have attempted to hold onto an underlying academic structure, hoping that my approach pushes the boundaries of academic discourse without collapsing them.

The stories that I have used begin with Plato and end with Descartes, exploring the continual re-articulation of a perennial tradition<sup>1</sup> within educational practice from its great flowering in Ancient Philosophy to its reworked Neo-Platonic and Medieval forms, its renewed Renaissance design and radical early Modern vision. Much stays the same

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<sup>1</sup> Huxley coined the phrase in his *The perennial philosophy* (1945), where he described an underlying tradition of wisdom within various faiths. See Huston Smith's excellent *Forgotten truth: the primordial tradition* (1992), as well as Schuon's *The transcendent unity of religions* (1984) and Nasr's *Knowledge of the sacred* (1981) for other influential accounts.

within these traditions – a great chain of being holds them together<sup>2</sup> – but much changes as well. Not only will a deeper picture of a specific vision of educational practice emerge as the stories open out to display, but a feel for how this inspiration altered over two thousand years will also disclose itself. One way that I picture the process is of a massive book of life in which various stories live out a palimpsest existence, written over by other tales, leaving traces that resonate across their erased surfaces.

In conducting this research, I set out a number of requirements. Firstly, as there were many educational stories within the tradition of a great chain of being, I chose narratives that attempted to *work a range of experiences* from the darkest deep to the heights of the sublime. Each story had to attempt a writing through the whole book of life. This crucial requirement sat at the heart of my project. In my years of study and work in education I had found a serious lack within myself in terms of articulating the lower and higher forces operating within education. We teach our teachers how to work within the everyday craft, but fail to expose them to the dark underbelly operating within the profession, that which corrupts, seduces, and destroys. Even more damningly, we often fail to provide adequate descriptions of the transcendent heights of teaching, of education in its most luminous forms. The intention of this thesis was to deepen and heighten our current discourses on education by re-describing pedagogic enterprises within our own history that attempted to work ranges of astonishing elevation and plummeting depth. Granted these tales are outdated and have been critiqued,<sup>3</sup> but current projects of re-

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<sup>2</sup> Lovejoy provided the definitive articulation of the history, nature and critique of the idea of a great chain of being in his beautifully polished lectures in honour of William James (*The great chain of being*, 1936). We will follow him fairly closely in parts of this chapter, using other modern articulators of the idea to supplement his majestic account.

<sup>3</sup> Lovejoy (1936) provides an excellent account of the historical collapse of the great chain under the weight of its own contradictions and absurdities but there are modern critiques of its structure as well. Wilber points to at least four weaknesses of the great chain (Wilber [1999] 114–120). Firstly it overemphasizes interior states at the cost of biological, sociological, political, economic, and cultural realities. Secondly there is not a solid grasp of pre-rational levels of development that have only really been secured by the

enchantment need to understand the attempts of their predecessors to assist their own, need to see the backlight more clearly when working in the present.

A dangerous outcome of the first requirement was that in covering the whole range of human life, the narratives tended to focus attention on elements of existence only known fleetingly and occasionally. Raging passion and sublimity are mostly rare creatures in our lives, yet in the attempt to give an accounting of the whole range of human experience a learning soul can travel through, the sheer intensity of these happenings force attention. It is like a bell curve, where both ends receive as much attention as the popular middle. The

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study of infants and children in the modern west. For Wilber this has meant that great chain of being theorists tend to make massive mistakes in their confusion of pre-rational states with trans-rational states. Infantile and magical wishes are often confused with higher level intuitive and meditative states because both are non-rational. A third weakness stems from great chain of being theorists' tendencies to not be able to clearly distinguish *pathologies* of pre-rational stages from trans-rational inspiration. Madness was often seen as the violent hand of God descending in prophetic inspiration, not the rantings of a schizophrenic. With the detailed study of 'madness' in modern times, clear criteria are emerging to distinguish the two states. This enables lucid recognitions of when, for example, a genuine shamanic experience happens as opposed to a mental collapse. A final inadequacy lies in its lack of an evolutionary perspective. It exists fully given, stable and unchanging in eternity. With the recognition of the processes of evolution, a massive reworking of the great chain has been necessitated, with characters like Hegel, Schelling and Aurobindo attempting an evolving rendition of Being. So the task becomes one of adding Marx, Darwin and Freud to the great chain's span, and this is what Wilber sets out to achieve. It must be noted that although these points are valid, objections to them appear when theorists of the great chain of being are looked at closely. Plato, Augustine and Dante amongst others, have clear understandings of, and engagements with, socio\political\economic issues as well as careful delineations of pre and post-rational states in their work, as we will see. Indeed much of the writing which we take to be addressed to the individual I is actually addressed to the community at large, as we see in the focus on the Church rather than the individual soul in most of the medieval accounts. Furthermore, our modern research into mental illness is not necessarily so profoundly 'on the money', as people like Laing (1965) and Foucault (1971) have pointed out. So we have to accept Wilber's criticisms with some reservation. That said, Wilber's work has deeply shaped my own and informs this thesis at its deepest levels.

everyday tends to get lost in the extremes, but as we shall see, a travelling through the borders results in the everyday coming out in all its frail richness.

My second requirement was that these stories *actively educate* the reader as they develop – *showing* her what the actual states are in the range of human experience and what techniques can be used to work through the journey, empowering the reader to follow suit if she wishes. I did not want stories that just described or narrated. The narration had to contain pedagogic effect and this pedagogic effect had to carry from bottom to top. Transformation of human states of existence needed to be explored throughout. The text had to enact the states, provide working tools, and as the states changed, so too would the enactments and tools have to change. The learning soul must be provided with a ladder to the new standpoints.<sup>4</sup> The text must show as well as say. This simply meant that I approached philosophical, religious, historical and poetic forms with an educational intent. I have not attempted to philosophise, preach, generate a historical account, or analyse poetic form, rather I have opened myself to the pedagogic effects of these forms and focused on them.<sup>5</sup> Many of the texts explored here have powerful metaphysical, epistemological and aesthetic projects. These I have back-grounded and preferred to focus on their pedagogical nature. This comes from deep inside – I am not a philosopher, minister, historian or poet – I am a teacher who is seeking ways of contributing to the calling.

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<sup>4</sup> I am picking up on Hegel over here, whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* fits precisely into this requirement. As he puts it in his preface to this great pedagogic text – ‘the individual has the right to demand that Science should at least provide him with a ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within himself’ (Hegel [1977] 14 – 15).

<sup>5</sup> It is not that I do not admire recent attempts to capture the history of western educational practice like Gutek’s *History of the western educational experience* (1995) and Bowen’s massive, scholarly *A History of western education* (1975), only that this project intends both less and more than a historical overview – it attempts to enact and show the effects of a specific tradition within our educational past on the reader.

My third requirement was that these stories come from a *western* past. Initially I was attracted to stories from across the world that combined the first two criteria, but a common thread of advice running through these traditions was to stay within the one you are most familiar with and explore it properly, so I stayed within the western house of Being. There are many interesting parallels currently being explored that are building towards a world picture.<sup>6</sup> I have used this research to help illuminate my reading within the western tradition but have kept away from detailed cross referencing. Rather than seeking configurations of patterns between accounts, I have preferred to allow each story space to articulate itself and then worked on reverberations between them. Comparing systems and structures is an important activity, but one tends to become involved in the surface\deep similarities and differences rather than letting the structure produce its practice, and it was this that I was interested in.

Fourthly, I looked for *different genres* of writing, eventually landing up with a cross-section including philosophical treatises, meditations, sermons, long poems, love poetry, travelogues, plays, lectures and confessions. Argument was not enough, I wanted an engagement of personality and an intensification of consciousness in various moods. Hopefully this added a certain richness to the various chapters. Even with these criteria in place, a multitude of educational texts presented themselves for analysis, so I have used

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<sup>6</sup> This is a massive area, but the work of Panikkar (1993) is as good a place to start as any. Bede Griffiths is a stellar example of the fruition that comes from combining the practices of Christian and Hindu traditions. See *The other half of my soul*, edited by Bruteau (1996) for a good collection of essays. Another good example is *The ground we share* by Aitken and Steindl-Rast (1996). The key point is that when deeply practicing characters meet from different spiritual traditions they have more to share than argue about. These commonalities are now opening out to careful articulation and breaking down the stereotype of eastern oneness versus western duality. The requirement of remaining within the western tradition also meant that the powerful historical influences of other cultures – especially Arabic – were also excluded. There are astounding texts from Muslim writers that fit perfectly within the criteria, but were excluded from this thesis. For example Ibn Tufayl's beautiful *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* tells of a young boy brought up on an island by a gazelle who teaches him the art of survival, the laws of the universe, and how to ascend to mystical experience. It is a key story that has many western reverberations (the most commonly known being Robinson Crusoe), yet I left these regretfully to one side.

the first footnote of each chapter to carry out a mini literature review of some of the important other stories that could have been included but did not receive intense focus. My concern was not to find arcane educational stories that only the esoteric would find interesting, but to retell the famous stories in a way that kept them released to us in all their richness, and to open the way for a new telling of our own story. The intention was to build up a pedagogic resource base that works with different kinds of teachers and learners and was able to respond to individual preference and modes of learning in subtle ways across the spectrum of human being. The danger of reaching a one-dimensional insight into the depths and heights of education is that one tends to apply it both too formulaically and too heavy-handedly. With diverse accounts the teacher learns to hold on to the insight lightly and can focus in on the learner *wisely*.

The last word consumed this thesis. We do not use the term wisdom<sup>7</sup> much anymore within our profession as an explicit outcome— a level of profound practical insight into the nature of things carried with a sure and gentle touch – but we know it exists because we meet with teachers like this in our schools who go about their everyday work in this way. How it came about for each would be a unique life story, yet the archetype shines through their individuality. How to point towards and encourage wise teaching, rather

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<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995) gives a good working definition – ‘a form of understanding that unites a reflective attitude and a practical concern. The aim of the attitude is to understand the fundamental nature of reality and its significance for living a good life. The object of the practical concern is to form a reasonable conception of a good life, given the agents' character and circumstances, and to evaluate the situations in which they have to make decisions and act from its point of view. These evaluations are often difficult because many situations are complex, conceptions of a good life are incompletely formed, and the variability of individual character and circumstances render general principles insufficiently specific. Wisdom may be identified then with good judgement about the evaluation of complex situations and conceptions of a good life in the light of a reflective understanding of the human condition.’

than wait for it to arise as a part of the roundabouts experienced within the profession, was one of the underlying intentions of this thesis.

Once this became clear there were many ways of pursuing the goal. The first was to do case studies of teachers in my local area who were considered to be good teachers by their peers and students. I did a number of interviews in this vein but realised that I needed clear exemplars to guide this research. The second possibility was to research the educational studies components of the various universities and colleges in South Africa. These courses are understandably directed towards developing what is conceived as a well-rounded, professional teacher who can both think critically and work effectively within the new dispensation of education in South Africa. Yet they lacked a full articulation of what it means to become a 'wise' teacher, even though much of what was done pointed in this direction. Besides, their main focus was to get teachers started, not to produce 'masters'. This turned me towards the question of who the great teachers were in our past, those who managed to 'teach an age' and were recognised as such, those of the Canon. This widened and heightened the notion of teaching but I turned to these figures with specific intent – what was their educational worth? To teach an age means that one has to encompass all of its forces from its depths to its heights and then powerfully demonstrate it, show it in your own unique instance. I was not fascinated by those who only hit the extremes (like De Sade for example) but those who were able to straddle the opposites, fill the middle ground in ways that embodied the epoch they found themselves within, *and then take others successfully through the terrain*. Plato, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare and Descartes among many others did this and we have a record of their work and proof of their influence, no matter how we dispute the authenticity of the Canon.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Canon is obviously a historical affair, shifting with each age due to changing political perspectives, social and cultural conventions, aesthetic shifts, gender bias, technological innovations etc. See Guillory's *Cultural capital : the problem of literary canon formation* (1993) and Brown and Marotti's *Texts and cultural change in early modern England* (1997) for two good accounts among many. Yet I do not think that its existence can be reduced to these factors. There is an excellence that embodies these very shifts in a

Here the options of how to continue the research opened out immensely. I could focus on one great teacher, like Plato or Shakespeare, and explore their manner of educating in detail. The problem with this approach was the single-minded focus on one specific teacher and his/her techniques, as great as they might be. It forced me into a specialism I wanted to avoid in the interest of rich comparison. This led me into the current form of this thesis. Within an identifiable tradition of some variety and depth (the great chain of being), comparatively describe a number of recognizably great teachers (Plato, Philo, Origen, Plotinus, Augustine, Abelard, Dante, Shakespeare, Descartes) in such a way that an integral picture of education is built up that facilitates wise teaching. There are many different ways such an outcome could have been achieved. This is only one particular route, and I hope that the process of reading this work performs its aim.

To enact pedagogy, to demonstrate through performance, was the final requirement of this thesis. The thesis aims to show through its very being what it has meant to educate a learning soul. It attempts to do what it describes in others – work a range, actively educate, open out in the western house of Being, use different genres, encourage wise teaching. The intended outcome of this thesis is the production of the very thing it is describing. It is a dangerous requirement to articulate for it is only seen in its effect, not in the articulation of its effect, like attempting to describe why a joke is funny, so let us move on.

The tradition of a great chain of being provided the time-span and thematic frame for this thesis. It received its classical formulation in the Platonic corpus and was decisively simplified and critiqued by Cartesian philosophy reducing its astonishing variety to God, mind and matter (although Kepler, Copernicus and Galileo exploded its imaginal world

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quintessential way, and then is able to reveal it to others. The highest point is reached when the writer has understood the life and conditions of his time by means of thought and articulated it. The power of this kind of pedagogy is the fascination driving this thesis.

more explicitly through the decentring of the earth). Even so, the great chain of being has continued in various other forms up to the present, but without the same dominance.<sup>9</sup> The reasons behind choosing to focus on texts within this tradition were threefold –

- It has been the dominant world-view of the western world for two millennia, as Lovejoy (1936) so brilliantly traces, and has provided the informing structure to the great educational ideal of our past – to contemplate The Good, or, in its Christian form, to become like God.
- These stories provided a range of educational experiences of astounding depth and height, contrasting sharply with my own experience of education, both as a student and teacher, providing a useful counter-language to current narratives of pedagogy. It is not that we do not use Sociology to point to inequalities and understand difference, or Psychology to work with individual learners from birth to old age, or Literature to develop empathy and insight, or Philosophy to develop critical thinking in life and the structuring principles of thought, or Environmental Studies to encourage a sustainable world, or History to understand our past and present – it is the lack of an integral picture to hold it all together. In a post-modern world I understood the need to be critical of grand narratives, but I did not really have a grasp of what these were in all their richness and power. The world I grew up in was always critiquing grand narratives as its own grand narrative. One of the first grand narratives – before those of Hegel, Marx, Comte and Freud – was the great chain of being, so that is what I turned to.
- Current research is revealing hidden potentials within its dismissed framework that can be usefully adapted for modern and secular educational ends once it has been critiqued and worked with in contemporary ways (Wilber [1995, 1997,

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<sup>9</sup> Lovejoy carries us a fair way into the modern with his final chapters of *The great chain of being*, but a good modern and updated survey can be found in Hanegraaf's workmanlike *New Age religion and western culture* (1998). For those who prefer a more personalized rendition, Harold Bloom's *Omens of the Millennium* (1997) reminds us of how these traditions still exert influence on the present.

1998, 2000]). Put differently, an understanding of the pre-Enlightenment canon reveals its continued existence in current practice in all sorts of transformed and deconstructed ways. For example, Heidegger's attempt to open Dasein out to Being can be read as modern analogue to ancient and medieval attempts to open out the soul to God.<sup>10</sup> Even better, Aurobindo's vast work *The life divine* (1970) integrates evolutionary insights into a reworked great chain of profound experiential depth. We still carry the history in all sorts of variegated forms, outlining its basic thrust helps us to see its presence, power and efficacy within the modern more clearly.

Before we go on to explore the fertile educational practices encouraged by the great chain of being through nine exemplars, I would like to provide a brief synopsis of this previously dominant worldview as it forms the skeleton behind the various tales. It is in Plato that we find one of the first full articulations of the dynamics involved in the idea of a great chain of being: the *descent* of Being into becoming; the *ascent* from becoming to Being; and a description of the *ground* and operating principles of both. The second of these dynamics portrays how a learning soul rises up from a life of uncontrolled desire towards a new world of Ideas, and finally into a sudden illumination beyond words or thought. This mystical reading of Plato is currently unfashionable, yet it was the dominant interpretation of his work for the time period that occupies us. Lovejoy provides five characteristics of the culmination of this Platonic journey into the Idea of Ideas –The Good:

- It is the most positive and certain of all realities;
- It is an unchanging Essence in which all else participates to varying degrees;
- It is difficult to perceive and entails the whole soul wheeling around from becoming to Being and practicing contemplation until it can intuit The Good;

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<sup>10</sup> This is superbly demonstrated by Caputo in *The mystical element of Heidegger's thought* (1986). I will elaborate on this in the following chapter on Method.

- It is beyond words and concepts; and finally
- It is the unqualified object of desire, a universal attractor drawing all learning souls towards it (Lovejoy [1936] 40–41).

Furthermore, The Good was so perfect within itself that it needed nothing else to fulfil itself. It was self contained, completely sufficient, gloriously alone. This consequence of The Good was explicitly drawn out by Aristotle but was a characteristically Greek assumption about the concept of being Good:

One who is self-sufficient can have no need of the service of others, nor of their affection, nor of social life, since he is capable of living alone. This is especially evident in the case of God. Clearly, since he is in need of nothing, God cannot have need of friends, nor will he have any (*Eudemian Ethics* VII, 1244b–1245b, quoted by Lovejoy [1936] 43).

The Good is utterly serene and unmoved by the learning soul moving upwards, forever resting in its own self contained perfection.

Yet this very Good was also, for Plato, the ground source of all becoming, flowing outwards in abandoned creativity from itself. This account of the descent of Being into becoming is found in mythical form in the *Timaeus*. The mystery for Plato was not in the eternal world of Forms – this was a ‘First World’ of obvious necessity – the mystery revolved around how this ‘First World’, so perfect and self contained, produced the everyday world of becoming. Being, by definition, existed eternally in its own perfection. It just Is. What needed to be accounted for was the descent of the One into the many – the beginnings of becoming – not Being itself. The reason Plato gave was that the Demiurge

was good, and in one that is good no envy of anything else ever arises. Being devoid of envy, then, he desired that everything should be so far as possible like himself. This, then, we shall be wholly right in accepting from wise men as being

above all the sovereign originating principle of becoming and of the cosmos  
(*Timaeus* 29, 30, quoted by Lovejoy [1936] 47).

In God's completeness he allowed all else to arise in its own particular fullness, nothing that could possibly exist was left out of the display. All grades of existence were permitted to become as full as they possibly could be. From the Idea of all Ideas, The Good, arose the world of individual Forms – the seed patterns of the Universe – attempting to capture in their variety the single essence of The Good. From the world of individual Forms arose the created material world, exhaustively copying the Ideas informing it. It was a sensory creation, full of all the variety and multiplicity possible to material existence, but living as one inclusive, whole being. Lovejoy named this conception *the principle of plenitude* (p52 *ibid*) – the idea that all conceivable kinds of living things are exemplified in creation, that no potentiality of being is left unexpressed, that a faultless and limitless Source would not leave anything possible pent-up outside of existence. Rather all that could possibly be – IS – and is as perfect as it could be. If it is possible then at some time it is.

The consequences of such a principle are profound, for the world of becoming now becomes a necessary part of the world of Being. Being would be incomplete without the torrent of fluctuating existence swirling out from it, The Good *unavoidably* needs embodiment to be complete, to be good. Goodness saturates the world. It is a peculiar reversal for a learning soul climbing from the shadows of becoming into the light of Being to find that, when she reaches The Good, It necessarily entails a celebration of all the existence she has so painfully wheeled away from, and demands a return to the cave with new eyes. This is the complex vision Plato bequeathed to generations following – an account of how to reach The Good from the cave of shadows, and an account of how the cave of becoming necessarily exists as a part of the goodness of Being. At its heart lies a transcendent Good that is immanent in All, an elevated One that descends into the many, a self-sufficient tranquillity that pours out in ecstatic fertility. Ascetic ascent succeeds

only when it abandons itself in celebration of life, when it embraces precisely what it has turned away from, when the sacred and the profane intersect.

Lovejoy argues that it was Aristotle who provided the other key concept necessary for the idea of a great chain of being – *the principle of continuity* – although it could have been directly deduced from the Platonic conception. This was the idea of a continuum, of being classified on a scale. The nature of the classification varied, ranging from scales of perfection to inclusion, potentiality and privation.<sup>11</sup> The key point was that between any two species distinguished on the scale there always seemed to be intermediate types combining elements of both. Distinguish between land and sea animals and inevitably one finds a sea animal that exists partly on land...and so on. This resulted in the conception of a chain of being with infinite links arranged in hierarchical order from the most trifling of existents to the most perfect with only the finest gradations separating off the various levels.

This grouping of concepts was definitively synthesized by the Neo-Platonists in the concepts of emanation and return, describing a process whereby Pure Form without material substance radiated outwards finally reaching a stage of pure matter without form, before turning back again. It describes the process of the infinite working with the finite. Allegory becomes a tool of great pedagogical value within this vision for all are emanations of the One, resembling It in some way. Fragments contain images of perfection distorted, allowing for processes of substitution leading back upward into clarity once again. As summarized by Macrobius, the design could be envisioned as a chain of reflecting mirrors:

Since from the Supreme God Mind arises, and from Mind, Soul, and since this in turn creates all subsequent things and fills them all with life, and since this single

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter's 4 and 5 of Barnes' *The Cambridge companion to Aristotle* (1995) for a good basic discussion of Aristotle's practices in this regard.

radiance illumines all and is reflected in each, as a single face might be reflected in many mirrors placed in a series; and since all things follow in continuous succession, degenerating in sequence to the very bottom of the series, the attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break. And this is Homer's golden chain, which God, he says, bade hang down from heaven to earth (*Comment. In Somnium Scipionis*, I, 14,15, quoted by Lovejoy [1936] 63).

Perfection is only realized in the fullest expression of all grades of imperfection, for only then will creation be full and without envy, only then will the richness of existence be celebrated in all its complex possibility. Contained within this overarching vision of existence was an extra-ordinary combination of transcendent and immanent logics held in a shimmering balance, but easily destroyed, either by an ascetic over-emphasis of the push upwards into the One or a blind plunge downwards into the Many without an informing Light. With the Christian reworking of the great chain of being, it was the ascetic tendency that tended to receive more emphasis. Initially, however, in the work of Origen and the early Augustine for example, all of existence was washed in an outpouring of Love, rushing out in super-abundance and returning in grace to its source. It was a vision still felt by Dante when he sensed divine love pouring out of the young Beatrice's eyes and undertook the massive journey back to her Fountainhead.

Contained within this emanative logic was a consequence of heretical force for a Christian God of primal free will. Did God have to create the world as He did because of a principle of plenitude? Was He forced by his own Good Nature to necessarily create all that He did? Typically, it was Abelard who baldly stated the consequence

Goodness, it is evident, can produce only what is good; but if there are things good which God fails to produce when he might have done so...who would not infer that he is jealous or unjust – especially since it costs him no labour to make anything? Hence it is the most true argument of Plato's whereby he proves that

God could not in any wise have made a better world than he has made... God neither does nor omits to do anything except for some rational and supremely good reason, even though it is hidden from us; as that other sentence of Plato's says, *Whatever is generated is generated by some necessary cause, for nothing comes into being except there be some due cause and reason antecedent to it.* Hence also is that of Augustine's, where he shows that all things in the world are produced or disposed by divine providence and nothing by chance... To such a degree is God in all that he does mindful of the good, that he is said to be induced to make individual things rather by the value of the good there is in them than by the choice of his own will (Lovejoy [1936] 71).

It was precisely because of this claim (amongst others) that Abelard was accused of heresy by Bernard of Clairvaux, and against this logic that many asserted the opposite thesis – that God was all powerful, able to change anything according to his own inscrutable Will. By the later middle ages, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham were pointing to the impossibility of any principle or logic having power over God – God decided what was good or evil, not the other way round. His creative abilities did not *have* to pour out, He could do with creation what He desired, He could redefine goodness and evil if He wished, He could do anything He wanted to.

As important as this dispute was, it revolved around logical principles, and could easily be circumvented by a recognition that God was able to hold these opposites within himself because He was God. Far more problematic were the practical implications of plenitude for the learning soul journeying upwards towards a likeness of God, for that likeness was partly one of descending fertility, not only self-sufficient tranquillity. The goal of all learning contained within itself a radical contradiction between the still clarity of *The Good* and the outpouring *goodness* of a self-transcendent fecundity. To reach upwards towards The Good the learning soul had to turn away from physicality, desire, flesh, creation – from all manifest existence – so that a still point of pure abstract insight could be attained. Yet the insight reached at this point was one of an outpouring goodness

enchanted with the multiplicity flowing out from It, an insight that pointed to the goodness of all that had been sacrificed to reach the point of intuition. Thus any looking back from the point of enlightenment would suddenly find all the past struggles and failures wrapped in beauty and love, all of existence would suddenly radiate the Divine. Rather than the One being a point of quiet focus it would become the circumference of all. The still point would become the dance. The effort to imitate God would suddenly shift registers from ascetic separation to creative celebration of all that exists, the learning soul would transform from abstinent devotion to artistic inspiration and worldly activity. The educational path upwards would meet with its descending fruits in original action. Identity and difference would gather in the oneness of love and the intricacy of beauty.<sup>12</sup>

Holding the two visions of Good goodness together in an integral whole was not always possible, and throughout Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Modern times, both visions have been taken to their logical extremes at the expense of the other. Fludd, for example, reduced the still tranquillity of the One to a formless, dark void – a ‘*deformed abyss*’, choosing rather to celebrate the warm and *becoming* activity of Light. Contrast this to John of the Cross’ direction to ‘aim at complete abstraction and forgetfulness...of created things’ and we can see how both visions were emphasized at the expense of the other (Lovejoy [1936] 92–97). Yet throughout these times we also see a concerted effort to hold together this fruitful inconsistency in a divine plainness – in Plato’s return to the cave, in Philo’s creative ecstasy, in Origen’s vision of the salvation of all, in Plotinus’ attack on the Gnostics while caring for orphans, in Augustine’s celebration of love in the stealing of figs, in Dante’s washing of the whole Comedy in words of beauty, in Shakespeare’s great outpouring, in Descartes’ salutation to the combination of mind and body in a healthy totality. These authors not only revealed how this fruitful inconsistency could be held together, but also actively demonstrated techniques that the learning soul could follow to attain the same insight in practice, and managed to hold us enthralled in

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Wilber’s formula captures the process well – ‘Flee the many, find the One. Embrace the many as the One’ (Rothberg and Kelly [1998] 43).

the process. They murmur to us – ‘listen: there’s a hell of a good universe next door: lets go.’<sup>13</sup> It is to such spectacular demonstrations of pedagogical finesse that I wish to turn, yet before we listen to their tales still whispering to us over the centuries we need to discuss how I went about the writing of this thesis. We need some method.

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<sup>13</sup> A phrase of e. e. cummings, quoted by the wise man of literature, Northrop Frye in *Words with power* (1990) 112.

## Chapter Two: Method

The key questions dealt with in this section revolve around my methods of reading, thinking, and writing. This will lead into a brief discussion of how I used Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Integral research methods to help construct this work.

### Reading

This thesis immersed me in reading. I found that reading occurred on different levels, but one level of reading was the most important for the writing of this thesis. It is a level that does not work with a summarizing or questioning of the text, or even a meeting of different horizons, but with a silent listening to what the text does. After the ground-work reading had been done, a more meditative practice took over where key instructions or phrases were carried around in me, took up residence inside, rested there and slowly opened out their power. This definitely only happened after the hard hermeneutic work had been done and was to a large degree dependent on it, but it took the reading to another level. The key phrase carrying the instruction that unites this kind of reading can be found in Heraclitus – *When you have listened, not to me but to the ...logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one* (Fragment 50).<sup>1</sup> This kind of listening to the word where an underlying unity emerges has been carefully described by Heidegger, and I will partly use his analysis as I found it most closely approximated my own.

In his brilliantly strong reading of ancient philosophy (*Early Greek Thinking* [1975]) Heidegger unveiled how we come to articulate something through an analysis of the word *legein* – ‘saying’. One of its proper senses is *to lay*, and his question was how a word originally meaning *lying before* came to mean saying\ talking. In answering this question he provided an excellent account that mirrors how my reading intersected my writing, of how a lying before the text faces a writing of its effects. It is a question of getting from lay to say, from listening to the text to articulating its upshot. It is a method that does not

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<sup>1</sup> For a good basic discussion of this fragment see Kirk’s *Heraclitus: the cosmic fragments* (1954) 65–71.

use the preying attitude of question – answer, or the war language of interrogation in analysing a text by breaking it down, dissecting it, exploring it for weakness and strength, support for an argument, proof of a thesis. Rather it demands humility and faithfulness in a letting lie together that slowly gathers. The difficulty with this kind of reading is not that of asking the right questions but of creating enough silence within to allow a hearing to ensue. After the research question has been explored, various questions asked, assorted clarifications made, horizons overlapped, explanatory notes taken, a more simple paying attention to the plain statements overtakes this early reading. Rather than making the text into an image of the agenda pursued, a letting lie forth allows a clearing to emerge. This way of reading involves less not more, but it is not an isolated kind of reading, rather you enter a moving and complex dynamic of enormous power. Yet this power is predicated on the silence of self, a dropping of questioning analysis, a disarming that lets unfold. It does not seek to add or overturn the text, choosing rather to humbly follow its path. It is a reading that steps away from causal explanations that expect the text to move in specific ways, leaving the text to chart its own course. It also steps away from specific philosophical standpoints, for its attempts to go along with, rather than rub up against.

This kind of reading was particularly important for the kinds of texts I was engaging with, as most of them pushed towards a kind of silent truth that worked noiselessly, an empty point to which all the words pointed, and the only method possible to read like this was by 'laying before'. This does not mean becoming dumb before the text, never responding, rather it means the opening of a genuine discourse that comes with hearing the other. Silence before the text is not about being brainlessly absent, rather it is a state of fullness that is predicated on being open. We tend to be suspicious of this kind of reading in a 'deconstructive' age, but Derrida is one of the best exponents of this kind of reading, a letting the text be in all its complex patterning. Derrida reads with a desire to allow all the logics of a text to emerge in their rich thickness. Rather than leaping into an explicatory response that abandons the labour of reading, the difficulty of silence is held onto, allowing the text its say rather than shutting it up with the urge to have our way (or its most obvious way). It is precisely when we tackle the text with our own agenda that

we have lost interest in it, preferring to bend it towards our flame rather than letting it be. A letting be of the text results in a kind of reading that counters the theorist in us, rather than being used to attack other theorists. It is a reading that accepts the gift of its otherness. It heeds the call of the other, undergoes the experience, receives its strike, submits to its force, and allows the reading to happen. Reading can only occur on this level by a taking leave of oneself, a standing aside to make room. Its exemplary model is that of sacrifice, of being open to the instruction, even when the message involves the sacrifice of one's most precious possession. It is a giving up of all the powerful, articulate, persuasive weaponry one has developed to attack a text, and replacing it with an allowal for birth of something that is not in your own image.

In this process a peculiar meeting point occurs between freedom and determination. One opens out so radically to the text that it can do anything, and because of this, it follows the pathings it is. This is a controversial claim, and it does not mean that certain truth has been reached about the text. Further reading, more research, could reveal the misjudgement of such an experience of reading. It has no claims to infallibility, yet after such a reading I found an increased appreciation of the text within, a certain aliveness to it. It was less that its truth was cast in concrete, more like it suddenly pulsed and flowed.

It is mainly with this kind of an experience of reading that I have felt moved to write, for it has entered my own interior world. Peculiar results ensue. A change occurs within, because it has happened as a piece of you, you have changed in the reading. Parts of yourself that were unnamed suddenly come out to greet you, frail hints of richness open out to articulation. In the silence what was murmur unfolds. Rather than listen to the word as it mirrors our expectation, it emerges in its own light, not narcissistically reflecting back our own image. This allows a breaking free from our own intentions and questions, allowing an internal growth to unfold that does not stick to the parameters of our own defining, breaking out with an informal logic that opens us out to radical possibility, to difference.

This kind of reading was encouraged by the texts I encountered. They actively incited this approach and even built up towards it by taking the reader through steps into such a stepping off. I will trace this process in Plato's *Symposium and Republic*, Philo's *Abraham*, Origen's and Bernard's *Song of Songs*, Plotinus' *Enneads*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Comedy*, Shakespeare's *Poetry \ Plays*, and Descartes' *Meditations*. All of these texts take the reader on a journey that eventually leads to the kind of reading described above, a silence that allows the Logos to come forth in its oneness.

Such a reading exists as both the precondition to all reading and as an expression of the heights that reading can reach. Obviously, for reading to be possible there has to be some kind of openness to the text. Reading presumes an ability to listen to the text as its ground, no matter how derivational this ground is, or what contextual barriers are thrown in the way. But when reading takes over, when it possesses, then there is no standing back to ask questions – that is for after. During the reading a leaving of oneself occurs and another world opens out on the expanse that is one's own forgetting. To those who love reading such an experience is embraced with ease, missed with melancholy, but very seldom looked towards as a method of reading. For good reason – the very attempt to make of it a method results in a losing of the clear space of the reading. Focusing in on the attempt to allow the text to speak for itself means that all one hears is one's own focusing in, not the text. It is a familiar paradox. The instruction is to use the will to forget the will – will your own will-less-ness. Yet there are various ways of quieting down to a point of silence, and these will be described in the chapters to come. Clearly such a 'method' of reading involved a preparedness to work on one's own quiescence, on a radical detachment that leaves one free and open to engagement.

As hinted at above, this was not the only way I read, indeed its occurrence was treasured and worked towards by other methods of reading. Often the reading began with a greedy kind of anticipation \ excitement for what the text could do for me, my thesis, my teaching, my enjoyment. This then broke into the labour of understanding – of background reading, commentary, biography, working the volumes to saturation point. Once a certain kind of

topographical awareness had been achieved, where repetition of the already known rather than discovery of something new obtained, critical questions about the text and why I was interested in it began to come to the fore. Problematics, aporia and weaknesses mapped out by critics loomed large and almost always seemed to shred the text. Different logics of the text seemed to spurt out, leaving it near collapse. If I could not see my way beyond these criticisms then I tended to discard it from the study, but mostly I attempted an integral reading practice at this point. This simply involved the injunction to look for what was valuable in the text, given its limitations, and attempt to work its insights into a broader and deeper context that dealt with the vulnerability while retaining the insight. A search for ever deeper contexts ensued, happily assisted by the texts of Ken Wilber that first suggested such a reading technique to me.<sup>2</sup>

It was normally at this stage in the reading process that the text totally transformed and seemed to speak out directly, that a sense of rhythm and flow to its way came out. Most (not all) criticisms of the text fell away at this point, mainly because they seemed to have missed the point, not listened carefully enough, taken as an end point what was only a step or an aside. Parts of the text that had been laboured through suddenly read like music and I fell away into its power. I have only focused on texts that took me over in this way – that began to move without pressure. It is one of the major selection criteria of the texts in this thesis. I cannot dispute that this is a personal measure, only point to how Plato, Philo, Origen, Plotinus, Augustine, Abelard, Heloise, Bernard, Dante, Shakespeare, and Descartes still powerfully speak to us today across the barriers of time, space, context and word. Obviously this reading experience happened with other texts in the range I was interested in – those that had charted the depths and heights of human existence and attempted to educate the reader through these intensities via the text itself. I made selections within this overall group based on other criteria such as the danger of repetition

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<sup>2</sup> In *Sex, ecology, spirituality* (1995), Wilber maps out twenty tenets that assist in developing an integral reading and thinking process of great depth, height, breadth and order. See chapters 2–4 for a detailed exposition or a simpler summary in *A brief history of everything* (1996) chapter 1.

and lack of flow with the other choices. These selections will be elaborated on and justified with the first footnote of each chapter.

With such reading comes a clear choice of responses in terms of interpretation – that of rabbi, prophet, or poet.<sup>3</sup> It is a choice between faithfully holding to the text and keeping it open for others to read; breaking open the present based on the power of the Word; or rhapsodically creating one's own celebration of the opening the reading has engendered. Tempted by the second and third paths, I have staunchly attempted to stay within the confines of rabbinical hermeneutics, trying only to keep the texts open to their own reading for a new age, leaving the other paths for future work. Yet the other two alternatives seeped into my responses, qualifying its rabbinical status. Undeniably as I opened out to the texts it was specifically *my* opening out, and in attempting to faithfully articulate this I have partly been a poet. Furthermore as I experienced the power of these texts, they pointed to inadequacies in the present and forced a kind of prophetic voice out of me. Effectively this means that these readings are partly my own creation no matter how faithful to the text I have been. They opened out in the individual space that is me. And as I have been engaged with a thesis, these texts have opened in a space that is also structured by the requirements of this thesis, stamped with its mark of seeking out educational tales of great depth and height. I have entered into a reading that attempts to be radically open, but this opening was always specifically pointed on me. Yet I must be clear that I have not attempted to radicalise my own voice, either prophetically or poetically, I have tried throughout to faithfully follow the text opening out in front of me in a way that releases it for others.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the biblical division between rabbi, prophet and sage. I pick up on Caputo's use of this typology, see *Radical Phenomenology* (1986) 116–119. Caputo has produced a work of rare commentary in *Radical Phenomenology*. I normally prefer reading the sources but found in his work a clear exemplar for the methods of my own and have used him extensively.

## Thinking

Immersed in a sea of reading, my thinking also worked on different levels, in ways very similar to what I have sketched above. I attempted to really think about the issue of what the heights and depths of educating a human being are. I suppose it is obvious that one of the most important facets of method is how one thinks about things – what one's process of thinking is. I found thinking hard, especially as the deeper my thinking went, the more it relinquished method in favour of an intuitive awareness, until eventually the notion of a method of thinking was included and transcended within a kind of openness to thought, much like what happened in reading. Here my touchstone was a fragment from Parmenides – '*But you should learn all: the trembling heart of unconcealment (alethia), well rounded, and also the opinions of mortals who lack the ability to trust what is unconcealed*' – fragment 1. 28 – 30. Heidegger discussed the implications of this for thinking in his *The end of Philosophy* (1973) where thinking experiences a place of stillness, a granting, the opening of the opening, the presencing of presence, where thinking and Being belong together, where all is so quiet that unconcealment can unwrap itself. It is a difficult thinking to let happen, as Eliot puts it 'human kind cannot bear very much reality' (Eliot [1974] 190). The best way I know of explaining it is by contrasting two ways of thought, epitomized by Leibniz's formulation that 'nothing is without ground' and Silesius' line 'the rose is without why'.<sup>4</sup> The first principle asserts that nothing is without a why, that a reason must be given for any proposition put forth, that nothing is unless a sufficient reason can be rendered for it, that the real has reason. The second proposition, in seeming contradiction, asserts that the rose somehow steps beyond

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<sup>4</sup> Found in Heidegger's *The Principle of ground*. I rely on Caputo's discussion of this text, mainly because he traces the lines of influence of Meister Eckhart on Heidegger brilliantly, and it was in Eckhart's work that I found the most guidance for my Methodology. See Caputo's excellent *The mystical element in Heidegger's thought* (1986) chapter 2 for an extended and accessible discussion. A similar juxtaposition can be found in Heidegger's lectures on Plato's Cave and the *Theaetetus* where he discusses the difference between the truth of unhiddenness and the truth of statements. See Heidegger's *Essence of truth: on Plato's parable of the cave and the Theaetetus* (2002), translated by Ted Sadler. It has come out too late for me to use in this thesis.

this principle. Unlike those who continually act with motive, who continually ask for reasons and seek justification, the rose just blossoms without concern. It is not that the rose does not have reasons for existing, clearly we can trace the ground of its blossoming, only that this does not hold *for* the rose itself – it is not without ground but *without why*.

Heidegger uses this example to point to a manner of thinking that falls beyond the principle of reason, for the poet has allowed the rose to just be, without seeking out explanations of its existence, without attempting to represent what the rose means. It is a way of being without why – ‘Man, in the most concealed depths of his being, first truly is when he is in his own way like the rose – without why’.<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger this is what we are in our deepest essence – first we are just Being, then that part of Being which sees itself Be, then we seek out reasons for our Being. Firstly we just exist, then we are that opening that is aware of Existence, then we search for answers to our thrown-ness into existence. That is our trinity. It is when we enter the way existence just happens that we enter the trembling heart of unconcealment, a world released from question-answer, subject object, a world described by Parmenides’ great philosophical poem *On Being* and met with in modernity by Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. It is this way of ‘thinking’ that reaches for where things rest in themselves, upon their own grounds, where things *thing*, that many of the texts included in this selection point towards. The best account I know of and used to develop this way of ‘thinking’ comes from Meister Eckhart’s German sermons on Letting Be, Poverty, and his meditation on Detachment.<sup>6</sup> As his exposition is remarkably clear and simple I will rely on it to elucidate the method of ‘thinking’ entailed to reach pure Being without why, although I will colour it with a Heideggerian brush and occasional images from the *Four Quartets*.

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<sup>5</sup> Caputo (1986) 65. Chapter 2 of *The mystical element in Heidegger’s thought* is devoted to *Der Satz vom Grund* (The Principle of Ground) and it is from here that I get my references to this text.

<sup>6</sup> See sermons 14–20 in Fox’s collection of Meister Eckhart’s sermons (1980) 285–294 and *Meister Eckhart* (1981) for his meditation on detachment.

Meister Eckhart's continuous concern was to point to how union with Pure Being (God) is possible. He did this by directing attention to that which is the same in human being and Pure Being – neither this nor that object but that which is Being in beings<sup>7</sup>, that which is pure existence in whatever. It is a sensitivity to the sheer astonishment that there IS. To reach union with pure Being it is necessary to rid oneself of all images of beings, for otherwise one focuses on objects rather than that which allows objects to Be. This kind of work involves detaching oneself from all images and entering an imageless world of just Being – the nothingness that is pure Being. It is an entering of the abyss for there is no thing in it, only the empty fullness of Being without beings. It is a place of full awareness, for it Is, but the awareness is simple and unchanging for there are no things to be aware of. It is the place where thinking and Being become one. To be empty of all beings and aware at the same time is to be full of Being. It is the entering of No-thing, a radical detachment where all things written in the heart obliterate, leaving a pure imageless receptivity. It is a sheer groundless ground of Being that allows beings to emerge. It is the astonishment at the pure-is-ness of existence, not that this or that exists but the utter amazement that there IS. Eckhart wished to get us to a point where we enter the purity of Being, plunge into the abyss of Existence. This is a place without why, it is before why, it is what allows why to be asked, it is a place where things just are, it is a place released from the requirement of giving reasons, for it is what allows reasons to spring forth. It is the still point where the dance is, 'except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance' (Eliot [1974] 191).

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<sup>7</sup> This distinction between Being and beings crops up a number of times in this thesis. I use it to differentiate existing beings as objects from the existential recognition of Being as the informing energy of All. Heidegger's point is that human being is the place where an awareness of Being becomes aware of itself. In doing this he takes the place occupied in Christianity by Christ and humanizes it. This place where Being becomes aware of itself as Being within a being is called *Dasein* by Heidegger (see Heidegger [1962] 7; 25; 41; 58). I prefer to call it human *being* within this text. The italics draw attention to the existential nature of the experience but differentiates it both from the pure Being of God and the objective existence of beings.

Such an experience shifts how thinking is thought – we do not think about existence, existence thinks through us. Rather than experiencing thought as if we are somehow separate from existence and reflecting on existence, we become that part of existence that thinks, that is aware of itself. Thought is a part of existence that reflects on existence. I am that part of the universe that is writing this now, that share of Being that is aware of Being and articulating it – not something separate from it pondering on it. First *I am Being*, then I am me...first I am that I am, then I am Wayne. So too, the stories told in this thesis are firstly Being showing itself and hiding itself in various playful ways, then it is Plato's story, Philo's story etc. This thesis is the opening that allows these stories to reappear, play out a repetition that shows a part of Being and then slips away again into another showing and hiding, another story, another play. Being thinks through us and we experience it as us thinking about Being. We tend to think from ourselves, place ourselves as that subjectivity that is separate from that object. We are that, but before that we are *that part of Being* that thinks of itself as separate. All I am is within Its art. We are not separate from existence. We exist. From this realization comes the clear and simple recognition that we are that opening where Being becomes aware of itself as Being, where beings can meet and interact as they always have been, but now with an awareness of the astounding play that is Existence.<sup>8</sup> This happens in the lighting we call human

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<sup>8</sup> This awareness of Existence and the beings within it is captured by Umberto Saba in his poem *The Goat*

I had a conversation with a goat.  
 She was tied up, alone, in a field.  
 Full up with grass, wet  
 With rain, she was bleating.

That monotonous bleat was brother  
 To my own pain. And I replied in kind, at first  
 In jest, and then, because pain is eternal  
 And speaks with one voice, unchanging.  
 This was the voice I heard  
 Wailing in a lonely goat.

In a goat with a Semitic face

*being*, in that space where Being became aware of itself, that point where the universe opened out in recognition of its own existence. We are precisely that opening, that lighting, that clearing where the play of the rose without why comes into awareness, bathes in its own naked light.

In thinking this no-thing, Eckhart reached a point where he broke beyond God, for God is already an image of what is imageless. In attempting to capture such a ‘breakthrough’, he described this imageless region as the ‘Godhead’ – fully aware that he was in the contradictory place of naming the nameless, of describing the abyss, of attempting to say what cannot be said, of clothing naked Being in the very act of attempting to see its nakedness (Eckhart [1980] sermons 21–29). Yet his major injunction is to develop practices that point us towards that same silent stillness inside us, a place where all voices and sounds are put away, for then we become like the Godhead. It is at this juncture that Eckhart elaborates on ‘letting be’ (*Gelassenheit*). For up to now we have been describing the negative practice of radical detachment from images and things, now it is incumbent to describe the positive process this silent passion gives birth to. After the deep-seated eradication of all attempts to understand, imagine, comprehend or analyse, the soul is released from its own willing. In its essence willing is the attempt to *impose*, and that is what our images and intentions do, they impose our understanding on things. Eckhart is after an extreme will-less-ness. Even the will to fulfil the will of God is insufficient at this point, rather an absolute poverty<sup>9</sup> must be entered where the soul is *released* from all

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I heard the cry of every woe on earth,  
Every life on earth.

(Washburn and Major [1997] 1030)

<sup>9</sup> ‘For a human being to possess true poverty, he or she must be as free of his or her created will as they were when they did not yet exist. Thus I say to you in the name of divine truth, so long as you have the will, even the will to fulfil God’s will, and as long as you have the desire for eternity and for God, to this very extent you are not properly poor, for the only one who is a poor person is one who wills nothing and desires nothing’ (Eckhart [1980] 214).

self-will and becomes an empty receptacle for receiving the Word.<sup>10</sup> At this point the soul is a nothing and is ready for unconcealment of Pure Being to occur, for the Rose without why, for the Heraclitean River. In Eliot's words, there is a 'release from action and suffering, release from the inner and outer compulsion, yet surrounded by a grace of sense...concentration without elimination' (Eliot [1974] 191–192). Now the soul does not act for the sake of anything, there are no motives or reasons or calculations, it is released into the freedom of just Being. Every act now arises in its own space, sustains for a while and then fades away in its own difference. The sake of the action is the action itself.<sup>11</sup> It is not that the action is without ground, but that the action springs from its own ground, not some external, justifying reason, or some internal fixation. It is like when a loved one asks why you love her. It is pointless (and dangerous) to give a list of reasons, you love because you love, without why, the love is and you love.

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<sup>10</sup> Eliot puts it well:

In order to arrive at what you do not know,  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not.  
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not.

(Eliot [1974] 201)

<sup>11</sup> Eckhart elaborates on this:

If someone asked life for a thousand years, 'why do you live?' then if it could answer, it would say nothing other than 'I live because I live'. This is so because life lives out of its own grounds and wells up of itself. Consequently, it lives without why by the fact that it lives for itself. If someone asked a truthful man who works out of his own ground, 'why do you work?' then if he answers rightly, he would say nothing other than, 'I work because I work' (quoted by Caputo [1986] 123).

Heidegger points to the same logic working in thinking. He breaks away from a thinking that is dominated by egoism and self-will, from a thinking that represents everything as an object referred to by the ego, from a thinking that looks out on objects from an independent inside. Released thinking experiences objects as that which appears through a clearing, a lighting, an opening of Being *that is you*. Rather than subjecting beings to the will, these beings rise and fall within an illumination that lets them be what they are. Presence bursts forth from the object in the aperture that is human *being*. Being becomes aware of itself as Being in the clearing that is the thinking. One becomes aware that thinking is happening through you and it makes you feel alive.

This experience is fully explored by Heidegger in his *What is called thinking* (1968). It is the deep that thinks through us in this state, and as this happens all of existence hums with life, the everyday gleams with the light of Being, the simple glows. Thinking is experienced as an abyss suddenly lightning. Heidegger struggled to articulate this kind of thinking (because of his own will to power) and was helped in his later years by his contact with eastern students and traditions, especially that of Zen.<sup>12</sup> In an evocative discussion of Lao Tzu he captured the process as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> Heidegger's desire to be the philosopher king of Germany led him into a badly misjudged celebration of the Nazis in the early thirties as the force that would break down the old with new, revolutionary power. This has resulted in a highly charged debate over whether such actions do not condemn his work, or at least taint it with Fascism. With the ground breaking research of Hugo Ott in *Martin Heidegger: A political life* (1993) this debate has become more pointed and nuanced. The key point for me is that Hannah Arendt forgave him and continued to love him and be deeply influenced by his work. The crux is that his actions were bad enough to need forgiveness, but not bad enough to condemn the man or his work. I leave this debate with her words. 'The gale that blows through Heidegger's thinking – like that which still, after thousands of years, blows to us from Plato's work – is not of our century. It comes from the primordial, and what it leaves behind is something perfect which, like everything perfect, falls back on to the primordial' (Arendt [1971] 52). She also provides one of the most profound critiques of his work in her juxtaposition of a movement towards Birth rather than towards Death and a shifting from 'things' like hammers in *Being and Time* to the social and political world of relationships. See Kristeva's marvellously profound biography *Hannah Arendt* (1998) for an account. Heidegger's later work reflected this struggle with the Will to Power, and was finally answered in the radical will-less-ness of his thought and his refusal to impose

Lao Tzu says (ch17), ‘one aware of his brightness keeps to the dark.’ To this we add the truth that everyone knows but few realize: Mortal thinking must descend into the dark of the depths of the well if it is to view the stars by day. It is harder to preserve the clearness of the dark than to produce a brightness which would seem to shine as brightness only. What would seemingly only shine does not illuminate’ (Heidegger [1968] 56, quoted by Zimmerman [1986] 256–257).

Each of these stories was written by those who experienced the will-less upsurge of thinking that overtook in a lightning flash of dark waiting: Plato’s leaping spark; Philo’s shower from above; Origen and Bernard’s kiss on the mouth; Plotinus’ Alone touching the alone; Augustine’s song of a child; Descartes’ vision; Dante being struck by a glance of Beatrice; Shakespeare’s torrent of words flowing onto the page. These stories are the stars seen from the well of a will-less waiting. Each of these thinkers then attempted to educate the human *being* into a similar state of readiness by opening them out to the play of Being, by encouraging a thinking that releases and lets Being be. Looking at the thesis now in front of me, I feel thought through by the words. ‘That a thinking is, ever and suddenly – whose amazement could ever fathom it?’ (Heidegger [1975] 11).<sup>13</sup>

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himself in the political and social arena. It is from this later Heidegger that I take some inspiration. See *Martin Heidegger: between good and evil* by Safranski (1998) for a well balanced account of Heidegger’s life.

<sup>13</sup> This feeling is magnificently caught by Lars Gustafsson in his poem – *Ballad of the Dogs*. He tells the tale of Ibn Batutta, a fourteenth century traveller who learnt about a country called ‘the Darkness’. I quote the whole poem, not only because of its profound beauty, but because it so accurately captures in metaphoric form the ‘method’ of this thesis.

When Ibn Batutta, Arabian traveller,  
 physician, clear eyed observer of the world,  
 born in Maghreb in the fourteenth century, came  
 to the city of Bulgar, he learnt about the Darkness.  
 This ‘Darkness’ was a country, forty days’ travel

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further to the north. At the end of Ramadan,  
when he broke his fast at sunset, he had barely time  
to intone the night prayer before day  
broke again. The birches glimmered whitely.  
Ibn Batutta, Arabian traveller, journeyed  
no further north than Bulgar. But the tales he heard  
of the Darkness, and of the visits there, engrossed him.  
This journey is made only by rich merchants,  
who take hundreds of sledges with them, loaded  
with food, drink and firewood, for the ground there  
is covered with ice and no one can keep his balance.  
Except the dogs: their claws take firm hold  
of the eternal ice. No trees, no stones,  
no huts can serve the traveller as landmarks.  
Only those long-lived dogs are guides into  
the Country of the Darkness, those old dogs  
who have made the journey many times before.  
They can cost over a thousand dinars, or even more,  
since for their knowledge there is no substitute.  
At meals they are always served before the men:  
otherwise the leading dog grows angry  
and escapes, leaving its master to his fate.  
In the great Darkness. After they have travelled  
for forty days the merchants make a halt,  
place their wares on the ground and return to their camp.  
Returning on the following day they find  
heaps of sable, ermine, miniver,  
set down a little apart from their own pile.  
If the merchant is content with this exchange  
he takes the skins. If not, he leaves them there.  
Then the inhabitants of the Darkness raise  
their bid with more furs, or else take back  
everything they laid out before, rejecting  
the foreigners' goods. Such is the way they trade.  
Ibn Batutta returned to Maghreb, and there

This kind of thinking was not the only way thinking happened. There was also much thinking of the reasoning, explaining, justifying, clarifying kind. Some of the time my thinking revolved anxiously around justifying the thesis, explaining my choices, twisting texts and ideas to suit my ends – personal, academic and professional. There is no dismissal of these styles of thinking within these pages, rather an embrace of them both as preparation for another kind of thinking to take over and then a retrospective picking up on and working over the thinking afterwards with the voice of reason, explanation, justification and clarification. There is a before and after thinking as well as just a Thinking, a ground-work thinking and a post mortem thinking that accompanies the descent of Thinking. All three are necessary, yet I have spoken mostly of the middle thinking, for it is often forgotten in method.

### Writing

With reading and thinking it was possible to let text and thought be after the hermeneutic and reasoning process had been pushed through – writing is not so easy. The reading and thinking come together, they work on the same principles of detachment and letting be.

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at a great age he died. But these dogs,  
 mute but sagacious, lacking the power of speech  
 and yet with a blind certainty that guides them  
 across wind-polished ice into the Darkness,  
 will never leave us in peace.  
 We speak, and what we say knows more than we do.  
 We think, and what we thought runs on before us,  
 as if that thought knew something we didn't know.  
 Messages travel through history, a code  
 masquerading as ideas  
 but meant for someone other than ourselves.  
 The history of ideas is not a knowledge of the mind.  
 And the dogs go on, with sure and swishing steps,  
 deeper into the Darkness (Washburn and Major [1998] 932–933).

Writing involved a continual meeting with the barrier of correctly capturing the already thought, the already said, the already experienced, and working it into academic structures. It has to work against its own effects in the descriptions it is attempting, it has to capture ecstasy within reason, learn to fetch but limit itself in the fetching.

The touchstone guiding me through the process of writing was the tale of Orpheus descending into Hades to regain his lost love Eurydice. His music enchants all within the Dark Realm, allowing the return of his loved one on the condition that he does not turn around and look at her as they clamber towards the light. At the last moment, as they reach the opening, he cannot resist and glances backwards, only to see Eurydice being taken back to Hades in the arms of Hermes, the messenger of the gods.<sup>14</sup> Disconsolate and unable to see her again he wanders the earth, immune to the charms of beauty, until the Thracian Maidens, incensed through Bacchalian rites, drown his mournful song with their shrieks and tear him to shreds with their own hands, allowing him to return to his beloved within the depths once more. ‘Released’ reading and thinking can both be seen as mimicking the initial love affair between the great musician and the beauty he adores. It also captures the successful love song that releases her from death and brings her back to life again, to the clearing, to the opening in the mind of the reader\thinker. But with writing comes the inevitable glance backwards, the attempt to catch the beauty unseen but following evocatively behind. In the moment of attempting to crystallize thought, Hermes suddenly appears and whisks beauty back into the depths, covered in the veil of meanings, lost to the lighting. What follows in writing is a memory trace, songs of remembrance that are paralysed towards new beauty, unable to move forward, stuck in the necessity of return to an absence, of *re-capture*, until new beauty breaks through the recollection with a Dionysian cry and dismembers the writing, allowing a return to the depths and the love of Eurydice...only for the process to happen again and again.

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<sup>14</sup> The tale is achingly told by Rilke – ‘As a fruit is filled with its sweetness and darkness she was filled with her big death, still so new that it hadn’t been fathomed...She was already loosened like long hair and surrendered like the rain’ (Washburn and Major [1998] 898).

It is in the repetition of the hermeneutic glance backwards that a certain dampening of enthusiasm is learnt, that a tempering happens where the ecstasy of the upward flight is continually held in a backward glance that loses, re-members and then is dis-membered. Writing occurs in the necessary discipline of the fleeting look towards the absence of what was present. It can be described as a kind of calculated inspiration caught in the structure it is creating, a 'cool web' of language that winds us in.<sup>15</sup> It is like the attempt to draw a circle with straight lines, an impossible but necessary labour that involves a curbing of extravagant enthusiasm within discipline and technique.

Holderin's discussion of writing based on Longinus serves as the exemplary model over here.<sup>16</sup> Longinus was interested in the dangers of becoming over-inspired and losing an immediate relationship with your audience because of it, of becoming over enthusiastic and falling into ridiculous hyperbole or exhausted flatness. He was interested in the rules of the Sublime – of how to produce and sustain its effect. Holderin twisted this discussion into a meditation about writing and how the writer has to struggle with the temptation of indulgent self-expression when knowing that a reader has to be able to make sense of it. Rather than being swept away in the ecstasy of creative expression, the writer has to attend to the demands of the textual medium, the surge of the thinking, and his own response to the thinking and writing happening. Longinus pointed to a stage in oratory where a great speech suddenly goes flat, quenched by its own ardour, flooded out with its own energy, losing clarity and power as it oversteps itself (*On the Sublime* 3–5). With writing there is a similar danger in turgid purple prose, but more insidious is a tendency to abandon the will and let the writing flow without attending to what the writing itself

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<sup>15</sup> The last phrase is Robert Graves' from his poem *The Cool Web* in his *Collected poems* (1975).

<sup>16</sup> I follow Timothy Clark over here and for the next page, picking up on chapters 5 and 10 of his superb *The theory of inspiration* (1997). The book actually delivers what it promises in the title, even though the project initially seems oxymoronic.

demands, resulting in a kind of masturbatory pleasure that is not useful for it does not engage with the other or its own history.

Blanchot picks up on and extends this insight in his path breaking *The Space of Literature* (1990) where he analyses the point at which what has already been written takes over the writing. It is a stage in the writing where personal effort and expression is supplanted by the work picking up on the logics inherent to it and beginning to write itself. In a peculiar way the author is cancelled out by his own creative beginning that takes on a life of its own, becoming drenched in the flood yet to come. This is the moment of pure writing that breaks away from personal inspiration, ideas and thoughts. The work unfolds by a logic inherent to it. The writing becomes a work that is open for reading by the writer who is now not only writing but listening at the same time, for you are being carried by your own work. It is a difficult moment to reach, for you have to be writing like this already. When this writing takes over, you become fascinated by the independent emergent properties of the very thing you are writing. At this point the work casts ahead of itself, becoming what it already is in its beginning (Heidegger [1975] 65–7).

My writing was caught between these two places of extreme enthusiasm and automatic writing, charting a course between the sirens, refusing to take as an ending either the initial inspiration or the work's own logic, for both shift as the writing continues. More importantly, both have to bend towards the exigencies of writing for a reader, in this case highly critical academic readers. One cannot write poetry for a thesis, for poetry enters the

highest as a lawless force ... and must abandon the law for it. Not as I will but as Thou wilt... *If poetry is bound by the law the spirit can only rock itself on a swing, grasping two ropes, and merely seem to fly...* But the eagle who does not measure his flight...his soul, being compelled by secret forces to escape self consciousness in the very moment of his highest consciousness...the spirit

hatches itself out and learns to soar, often carried away by the sacred rhythm, then borne along, swung up and down in sacred frenzy (Salzberger [1952] 56, my emphasis).

Thesis writing, rather than surging upwards with the eagle, embraces the two ropes and swings back and forth between the song of the underworld and the shredding of the Thracian Maidens, caught in the glance backwards – that is its law, its sentence. Here words ‘strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still. Shrieking voices scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, always assail them’ (Eliot [1974] 194). In these conditions, the words must still be put down, carefully, precisely and responsibly.

Yet the temptation is to continually sacrifice the work for the ability to return and repeat the moment of inspiration – a preference for desire over articulation, for the movement towards rather than the account of, preferring to destroy with a glance what could have explored in a sustained manner. It is the romantic wish to keep on falling into Cimmerian love rather than loving the one you are with in the light of the everyday. Academic writing wishes to see Eurydice in the daylight hours, opened out for exploration, wants to *state* clearly what was *shown* in the hint. Yet ironically, it is precisely Hermes who carries Eurydice back into darkness. Hermeneutics, the art of carrying messages, is that which clothes naked Being and guides her back into the Dark. It is to this capricious god that we must now turn for an elaboration of the method used in this thesis to listen to the messages from the Tradition, for, in the glance backwards, all Orpheus sees is a hint of Eurydice covered in the mantle of Hermes. What is this method that celebrates such a loss, what is this Hermeneutics that embraces Hermes’ task?

### Hermeneutics

One way to imagine it is as a postal service, messages being sent and received, with Hermes as the deliveryman destined to give a message that covers the absence of the sender. A letter is always already a replacement for an absent presence, a message that re-

invokes a feeling or thinking already felt and thought, a vehicle that carries a thinking from one to another in a translated form. There have been various conceptions of this postal delivery system within the history of Hermeneutics, ranging from the biblical belief in the pure divinity of the message posted from God to us, its infallible truth guaranteed by the might of the Sender, to the deconstructionist riposte that it works more like our own postal services – mostly the mail fails and if you do receive then either it is the wrong letter or it has been tampered with. I would like to briefly and simplistically discuss four methods of delivering mail within Hermeneutics: that of Husserl's Geometric truth; Gadamer's traditional fusion of horizons; Heidegger's eschatological delivery; and Derrida's glitchy service<sup>17</sup> – not for the purpose of critique but rather to characterize the terrain of choices from which my own particular preference comes.

In his *Origin of Geometry* Husserl argued that an ideal and repeatable message, fully constituted in its ideality, can be sent across the epochs, borne by different translations, if it is formalized accurately, as with the geometric tradition.<sup>18</sup> For Gadamer's *Truth and Method* there is a tradition of only posting One Message through the ages, but each age has to freshly translate it for new horizons, attempting a meeting of contexts where the message can be understood from within an original setting, repeating the same perennial truth in ever varying manners.<sup>19</sup> With Heidegger's middle period, an original message of

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<sup>17</sup> I am following a useful categorization suggested by Caputo in his brilliant *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> See Derrida's excellent discussion in *Edmund Husserl's the Origin of Geometry: an introduction* (1977).

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics was the second closest conception of the method used in this thesis after Heidegger's later work. His emphasis on continually renewing the tradition in new circumstances is a worthwhile vision. Such an ability involves applicative abilities that cannot be put down to method, for situations change, so does method, what is needed is an insight into the tradition and a creative repetition of it for current times. The tradition is always on the move. There is an unchanging truth which is changing all the time, with no final formulation. There is a stable meaning but continually changing expressions of that meaning. It gets passed down through dialogue and dialectical mediation. It is never understood *better* by various bearers, only differently, and Gadamer's great task is to articulate the

elemental power is slowly fragmented, becoming more and more distorted and faint in repetition until a deep-seated thinking manages to hear the original letter in all its force and breaks through the sedimented deformation, revolutionizing an age gone tired with an ancient message made new.<sup>20</sup> For Derrida the postal service itself comes into focus, not the sender or receiver. There are only multiple transmissions and sendings, no final message, no original message, only messages continually sent, continually disrupted and corrupted, forever shifting and changing, working their own logics.

In contrast to these four services I have preferred to view the messages being sent and received in this thesis more in line with a fragment of Heraclitus, brilliantly discussed by the later Heidegger in critique of his own eschatological postal service:

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tradition and its working for our age. The truth of the tradition is not questioned, only the dynamics of communication. Gadamer provides us with an excellent explanation of how the infinite resources of a tradition get passed on and renewed in finite but indefinitely new forms. The danger lies in the uniform conception of this tradition. There are no breaks and changes, it is the same meaning that keeps being spoken in different words. For Gadamer the play and flux is always on a ground of unchanging truth, he looks for a fusion of horizons between old accounts of the tradition and our own horizons so that we are enriched.

But, crucially, Gadamer does not move fully beyond horizon in favour of the OPEN, that which allows Being to arise, that which allows the distinction between Being and beings to arise. This we find in the later Heidegger and it is this that resonates with the end point of many of the journeys undertaken in this thesis.

<sup>20</sup> I take Derrida's critique of Heidegger seriously, as Heidegger does tend to assume an original clearing of Being with the Greeks that gets overlaid and is ready to break through again in such a way that the beginning overtakes the end with a new beginning. This then forces a working with the later Heidegger who sees the play of Being/beings, varying over epochs, produced by a playful ground presenting itself in different ways. There is no privileged epoch, we have to get beyond expecting a special message delivered from the ancients about Being. Caputo takes the reader through this difficult set of debates with clarity in *Radical Hermeneutics*, Chapters 6 and 7.

Time is a child playing a game of draughts. The kingship is in the hands of a child.<sup>21</sup>

The various messages received in this thesis are viewed as those of a child playing a board game, each revealing in their own way the groundless ground of Being. Each shows an aspect of Being, but in showing also hides. The crucial point is not to seek for the causes and principles of how such a showing changes through the ages – it is a child at play, this is the Being of beings, a river always flowing in the sameness of its riverness, it is before Why. To attempt causal explanations as to why it was that the Greeks were open to Being in a way different to the Romans, Medievals, and Moderns often results in the illusion that we can easily gain purchase of such complexity. To say that Descartes is responsible for our modern dualistic abuse of nature due to his separation of mind and matter is to hopelessly misjudge the complexity of matters. To blame Plato for the ascetic disciplining of body, Augustine for repressed sexual attitudes, Shakespeare for the breakdown of the chain of being, is to miss how Being worked through them, how in their opening Being played out an aspect of its beauty. I have preferred to celebrate this working rather than attempt critical comparisons and explanations, tried to continue the show rather than bring the curtains down and explain why the show was important and how it relates to other plays, as important as this critical endeavour is.

It is this late thinking of Heidegger that I use to conceptualise how the stories told in this thesis hold together.<sup>22</sup> He does not attempt a causal explanation of why these displays shifted, rather he prefers to trace its play, listen for the transfers in the way language

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<sup>21</sup> Caputo discusses this aspect of the later Heidegger in *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) 201–203, and I follow him closely over here.

<sup>22</sup> The great Kyoto school found in this vision of the continuous play of groundless Being a useful addition to their Zen work. There is a tendency to treat the Great Abyss as a never changing a historical 'entity', Heidegger provides the corrective. See Zimmerman's superb *Eclipse of the self: the development of Heidegger's concept of authenticity* (1986) for a useful discussion of this point.

secretes its sedimented meanings. This does not mean that other explanations are illegitimate, that attempts to provide whys for the movement of Being are wrong, only that this thesis is not engaged in that project, preferring the simpler task of opening out how the depths and heights of Being revealed itself within a sampling of pedagogic texts across the western tradition. From this perspective the attempt to give reasons for the shift in Being involves the peculiar attempt to supply grounds for that which, as Grounding, has no grounds but is the ground. As Heidegger puts it: *The question remains, whether and how, hearing the movements of this play, we play along with and join in the play* (Caputo [1987] 202). He describes the shifting epochs as follows:

...these epochs spring up suddenly, like buds. The epochs can never be derived from one another and forced into the course of a continuous process. Still there is a tradition from epoch to epoch. But the tradition does not run through these epochs like a strand which ties them together; rather the tradition emerges each time from the concealment of the destiny, just as from the same source different streamlets emerge, nourishing one stream which is everywhere and nowhere (Caputo [1987] 203).

Each of these epochs reveals the full destiny of Being in different ways. The texts I have chosen have become recognised touchstones and points of organization around which Being is understood in the particular epochs explored. In each it is the *play* of Being itself that is the deepest and the highest, for all structures are inscribed on the flux of Being, yet within each text a pedagogic movement is traced that takes us towards this highest wisdom – to join the play in a free, productive release – before falling back into the game. Here the temptation to tell a grand narrative with teleological force must be resisted, as brilliant as those like Hegel's are. What we have instead are partial stories that run their own race, often intersecting with others, stopping in unexpected places, suddenly accelerating or turning around. The intention behind this was to generate insight into the nature of teaching in all its integral complexity rather than generate a causal historical account.

This free and productive movement precisely works against method, but only once the method of reaching it has been rigorously followed. Only at the point where method has been carefully followed through all its stages can it finally be dropped. Love and do what you will, as the quote from Augustine goes.<sup>23</sup> It is not about anarchy. To reach the point of detachment, of releasement, of Love in its pure Form, a painstaking following of method has to be endured, a whole alchemy of change undergone. To be fully creative as an artist much training and skill is needed. Similarly with this thesis, I have not attempted a free-write. The rigors of academic reading and writing have been embraced, worked through up to a point where they suddenly released me into a free space of reading and thinking that was continually glanced back towards in writing. The object of scholarship then becomes a matter for thought (Caputo [1986] 222). It was partly in working through the method of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics that I found such releasement possible.

### Phenomenology

A key aspect of Phenomenology is its search for the fore-structures within consciousness that prepare for the actual appearance of the object being looked at (Heidegger [1962] 5). On one level the stories told in this thesis serve educationally by setting up the preconditions to experience the various levels of ‘reality’ ranging from a stone through to Pure Being. They act as anticipatory fore-structures, helping the learning soul to recognise what would otherwise escape its notice. The key difference is that Phenomenology was mostly concerned with describing ordinary states of consciousness, whereas the texts under review attempt to work with a range of states of consciousness. It is dangerous to *only* examine ordinary states, for then one only finds out about ordinary

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<sup>23</sup> *Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos, VII.VIII*. It is one of Augustine’s most famous quotes, but does not quite exist in this form in his work. Its actual statement is as follows – *Dilige et quod vis fac*, whereas it is popularly handed down as *Ama et fac quod vis*. See Knowles’ *Oxford dictionary of quotations* (1999) for a brief discussion.

things. Yet even as one extends the spectrum the same principles hold up to the point of releasement – the learning soul needs to already partly recognise what is to be understood, otherwise it will not know what it is looking for. This results in the famous Hermeneutic Circle where interpretation already needs some implicit understanding to be recognised, where in order to understand the text one already has to know what it is about (Heidegger [1962] 7; 152–153; 314). The pedagogic work of the stories explored is to precisely provide this ability to recognise experiences beyond ordinary levels of consciousness, specifically by beginning with everyday experiences and then slowly working into and beyond them and then finally back to them.

The educational effect of these stories on me personally can be partly described as eschatological – the experience of the beginning outstripping the end and forcing a new beginning, of the early overtaking the late, of the end being pushed beyond itself by the beginning into a new inauguration. As Heidegger puts it – ‘the oldest of the old follows behind us in our thinking and yet it comes to meet us’ (Heidegger [1975] 10). It is a peculiar experience, to find in these early texts of our Canon methods of educating the modern reader beyond himself, but such is the power of their reading. They partly have this power through their ability to work the phenomenological effect of providing fore-structures that put in place the capability of having the experience in the first instance. Yet I do not want to use these phenomenal stories for an apocalypics that turns our modern age into a dark present that has destroyed the primordial beauty of Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance play. We are in our own playing, our own beginning, our own becoming, all that these stories do is show how it was done before so that we can do it again, differently.<sup>24</sup> They assist the anticipation of our own recognition of *being* an

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<sup>24</sup> We find many modern techniques of doing this, many of them exotic caricatures within new age religion. A more sober one that I would like to focus on within a university environment is ‘Event lecturing’ – where the lecture manages to create the fore-structures necessary to having a new experience. We are in the well known terrain of ‘scaffolding’ and constructivism here, but I am pointing to the ability to work an experience beyond the range of everyday consciousness. In the accounts of attending the lectures of Heidegger, students attest to the astounding ability he had to open them out to ranges of experience within

opening to Being – they assist our own educating, our own wisening. In the end they are all systems of pedagogy that have to accept their own dissolution – of recognizing their inadequacy in the face of what they have pointed towards. They step aside once they have carried you to that site, as we will see Virgil and Beatrice do with Dante later on. A specific point is reached where to be faithful to existence one has to move beyond the region of thought that brought you there, step out of pedagogy into practice. It is the most difficult of things – to let go of deliberation and allow the event to happen, to move from the unfolding of a necessity to the uncharted journey, to be open to how the actuality of the event genuinely transcends its possibility, to how the event is not contained or enclosed by its possibilities, that it happens in its own uniqueness. The pedagogic skill of the stories is to get the reader to the point of actuality beyond metaphysics, where thinging happens first and whys later.

This abyss of freedom is pre-delineated in the stories through nimble, anticipatory sketches that allow the reader to work towards it. The stories provide traces, prior projections that allow for recognition of possibilities beyond present conditions. But these stories have to be continually retold and new ones invented, for they are cast in the form of words, and words can be used in many different ways, often losing their power and meaning in repetition. It is the danger of writing a message that the meaning intended might not be conveyed or is distorted, half read, misunderstood, forgotten, misplaced, out-dated, out-moded, copied out. The necessary communication is also a dangerous one, for the experience can get lost in the words. But the risk has to be taken, for the experiences pushed towards need a form of pre-cognition, and for this to happen at least three fore-structures are needed. Firstly a glimpse of the whole system or situation is needed, a kind of a background grasp of what is happening, a ‘fore-having’ in Heidegger’s terms (Heidegger [1962] 150; 193; 327). Each of the stories told provide this kind of a background lighting by providing an overview of the terrain covered. Secondly

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them that they did not know existed, all through a lecture. Fichte and Schelling among others had the same ability, and if my thesis could have been longer I would have explored this genre along with the others.

there is a need to glimpse what the subject itself is within the situation, of how it emerges, a kind of ‘fore-sight’ (Heidegger [1962] 80; 150; 232–234; 268). Again each of the stories chart a path through the landscape that enables a specific focus on the various subjects met with on the path itself, they rise to our sight as it were. Finally the specific concepts that make the particular subject emerge need to be touched on, a kind of ‘fore-grasp’ that allows the definite feature to come out (Heidegger [1962] 150; 232–234, 268; 290). The stories provide specific practices and concepts that enable the path to appear, as well as describing the path and the terrain it exists within. If we do not have these fore-structures then the actual experience cannot be made sense of, for it needs a prepared space to emerge within, to be recognised.

The method of the stories is to prepare these fore-structures in the reader, and then to provide techniques that result in their abolition so that a kind of poverty or detachment is attained where something radically new can break in, something so new that it needs an emptying of the very fore-structures previously encouraged and stimulated. The fore-structures set up in the stories demand their own abolition, for they are fore-structures of detachment, of poverty that rub themselves out as they are implanted.<sup>25</sup> Again it is Meister Eckhart who encapsulates this whole process in his sermons on Mary and Martha – on the virgin and the wife. The key phrase is ‘*The word wife is the noblest term that we can attribute to the soul; it is far nobler than virgin*’ (Eckhart [1980] 274). Detachment, humility, poverty of the soul, these are the self effacing fore-structures that allow for a virginal state, a state where we even have to let go of letting go. But all of this is only

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<sup>25</sup> Eliot captures this beautifully in his own reworking of the tradition of being conscious of nothing:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing

(Eliot [1974] 200)

preparation for entering the world of relationships and work, of becoming a wife who gives birth, who bears fruit, who creates. It is a place where thought and being, action and being, become one (Eckhart [1980] 388–391). It is the place where Hamlet can suddenly act in a way that is thoughtless, for the action is the thought, rather than being paralysed in thought and bumbling in action. This is to where the fore-structures of the stories educate the reader and this is the point at which the hermeneutic circle becomes redundant.<sup>26</sup> For what is entered is the open expanse where things rest in themselves rather than as objects taken up from a specific objective, we enter a regioning, a thinging, a place beyond what is present and presence – a place which gives presence. It is precisely beyond subjective construction for it has learnt to drop these through a far-reaching will-less-ness that allows Being to walk through it. Words are now not spoken about Being but from Being. All attempts at objectification are dropped and in the releasement Being and human *being* intersect, for human *being* always was that clearing where Being rose to awareness – ‘Being’s poem, just begun, is man’ (Heidegger [1975] 4). This is the ‘method behind the madness’ of the following stories in varying ways, and it is also the ‘method’ of my thesis.

The above description partly belies the difficulty of the process of reaching ease. Each attempt to read, think through and write the various journeys of the learning soul through ancient, medieval, renaissance and early modern landscapes felt like a new start and a new failure. Eliot captures the process precisely:

Every attempt\ is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure\ because one has only learnt to get the better of words\ for the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which\ one is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture\ is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate\ with shabby equipment always deteriorating... And what there is to conquer\ by strength and submission, has

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<sup>26</sup> Hence as we enter the later work of Heidegger that focuses in on this ‘open expanse’ so discussion of the Hermeneutic Circle fades away.

already been discovered\ once or twice, or several times, by men one cannot hope\ to emulate – but there is no competition–\ there is only the fight to recover what has been lost\ and found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions\ that seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.\ For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business (Eliot [1974] 202–203).

There is only the trying to keep the opening open by showing paths towards it – that is what these pages are.

### **Emergent premises of operation**

Underneath this method of detachment and letting be, various operating premises also emerged as the thesis built itself up, and these need to be specified as well as the more esoteric descriptions above.

#### **Seriously follow the injunctions of practice set out in the various texts.**

The kinds of texts that qualified for analysis according to my criteria had specific techniques to reach certain states of consciousness. I took their injunctions seriously and attempted the practices myself. Obviously I had to adapt the recommendations – Plato’s curriculum took fifty years – but if the text described specific techniques, I sympathetically tried them out. This was one of the main functions of these various texts – they were used meditatively by ancient and medieval readers.<sup>27</sup> I followed suit. I discovered that such an approach immeasurably helped in unlocking the deeper meanings and more difficult passages of the texts, especially when their narratives journeyed into the more internal and upper regions. If Descartes asked me, the reader, to take the evil genius seriously, to the best of my ability I followed the instruction. If Plotinus required a cutting away of everything and waiting in quiescence for the downward surge of Love, I attempted the state. Dante and Shakespeare worked in a different way, they specifically

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Stock provides an excellent account of the history of meditative reading in his *After Augustine: the meditative reader and the text* (2001).

stimulated the imagination, so I endeavoured to empathically follow their evocations. If Bernard described how to reach a 'visit of the Word', I tried his route. As much as possible I attempted to follow the injunctions to practice so that a phenomenological understanding of what was being described could be attained. If I could not attain the state then I attempted to imagine what the state entailed – even if the state entailed a quieting of the imagination, then I imagined it. As far as possible I attempted to re-evoked the text. The effort was to actually experience the event described, rather than treating it as an object of scholarship or calculative thought. I endeavoured to speak out of the experience, from the opening the text itself engineered, not from an attempt to understand or explain the text.

**Use recognised critics as guides but rely on a detailed reading of the actual texts.**

I would initially seek out a recognised and contemporary expert on the text that fell within my criteria to provide some fore structuring. If s\he was controversial then I would seek out the strongest counter voice as well, but after that I put them aside, got out the collected works, and plunged into reading and re-reading the corpus. Mostly the texts were in translation, so I got as many of the variations as possible and read them jointly as my Greek, Latin, French, German and Italian is hardly existent. I did not feel that reading in translation cut me off from the originals so long as I read extensively and carefully. Rather than getting bogged down in various minute debates and entering the eternal round of reading responses to responses of responses, the actual text without fail appeared fresher, simpler, easier to read, and more profound when the basic was done – reading it. In the main the voice of the critic died down as the actual text emerged in all its fascination.

**Seek out recognised thinkers who have managed to grasp a long time frame in intimate detail and read them to gain a broad perspective on patterns within that time.**

Authors such as Hegel, Gilson, Lovejoy, Heidegger, Freud, Jung, Neumann, Eliade, Campbell, Balthasar, Tarnas, Foucault, Taylor, Habermas, Heidegger, Gadamer, Wilber

and many others present the reader with massive visions of the history of the western experience that come from deep immersion within the tradition. These writers have developed an integral kind of perspective where they manage to hold together massive amounts of seemingly contradictory tendencies within generating patterns that help the reader make sense of the material. It is a highly developed skill, to integrate more and more material within a frame (whether it is constructive or deconstructive in method). Effectively it has meant, for most of these authors, that they have had to increase the depths and heights of their understanding to accommodate such a massive range of material. As I was looking for stories of great depth and height, I naturally found these authors really useful. It was mostly in their work that I found pointers to the kinds of texts I was interested in, often with penetrating analyses. A corollary of this rule was a continual look out for those authors writing from an experiential level of understanding. Ken Wilber knows what he is writing about in terms of non-duality because he is adept within it. The same can be said in different ways about the various authors explored in this thesis.

**Research something that answers a lack within yourself, that answers a question that you do not have the capability to answer yet.**

This research began with the failure of a novel I wrote on education. *Penance* attempted to explore the underside of teaching that I had experienced in my ten years within the calling. It was not mainly about the terrible conditions of teaching within massive swathes of South African schools, but about the dangers and failings that arise from good teaching – the deadly sins of good teaching. By the end of the novel it was apparent that I was adept at analysing the unconscious dark streams of education but was unable to extend this insight into the clear streams of good and beautiful pedagogy. I had experienced and practiced such teaching but was unable to articulate it, preferring always to point to the negative underside. Something in me was radically foreshortened, and this thesis was about finding ways to open myself outwards to education in all its depth and glory – to again see Beatrice. Within the service profession we are in, where we use ourselves as tools, I have attempted to improve my usability.

**Live and think as much as you read.**

This is different to the first rule, but related. The first rule endeavours to actively participate in the text by generating the phenomenological states helpful to a fuller understanding of its levels. This rule points to a continual dropping of the reading to allow one's own life and thought (or lack of it) to come through. It entails practices of contemplating issues and things from where you are, allowing one's own living and relationships to emerge in their own clarity. I have my own partner to thank for this – she refused to be buried under the thesis, insisted that I see her for who she is in her fullness, and taught me to stay in the river of life, even though I often longed for, and occasionally skirted, the stereotype of the absent minded post graduate. I suppose this is a rule of thumb for life, not research, but it enabled the research to stay grounded within the activities of everydayness, enabled me to live in my research.

**Enjoy the official details and duties.**

There is a kind of insane voluptuousness that comes with tracking down and placing the fine details, of getting this done, then that. No thesis can be written without an embrace of this experience.<sup>28</sup> Along with the experience of insight pouring in from the text comes the necessity of chasing down details, of building reference lists, of checking grammar (sic) and spelling etc ect.

**Attempt to think from beyond the area of focus so that one can see it topographically.**

After empathically working from inside the text, I also attempted to find some kind of other ground from which to experience it from. By this I do not mean a critical or opposing stance, rather a deeper\higher\wider position that had included and transcended the positions being narrated. Now this is a controversial way of doing things, especially

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<sup>28</sup> Theodor Storm even wrote a poem about this experience. See his *At the Desk* in Washburn and Major (1998) 803.

with our Archimedean points of leverage deconstructed and replaced by Neurath's raft. To use a previous metaphor – if each of the stories write out a picture from the book of existence, the place I tried to think their writings from was the book itself, from Being in its unwritten state, from what it is that the stories emerge from and return to, before the image, before the word. I wanted my method to work from a place beyond the area of study so that it could delimit it – see it as a whole, place it. This was a difficult ask, given that the stories I was exploring already attempted to think through the deepest deep to the highest height. Yet at specific points their narratives stop, like when Dante finally intersects with Being in Paradise, when Plato writes about The Good in the 7<sup>th</sup> letter, or when Descartes experiences God. It is from those points that I attempted to take up the stories, for it was from those points that the stories were suspended from. I was helped in this difficult regard by Meister Eckhart, Wilber and the later Heidegger, all of whom attempt to live and think from this other place without Why, this place of opening.

To describe this 'lighting' in my own terms, without the stories to guide and point is a difficult task, but it would be remiss of me not to attempt such a description, for this is the place from which my thinking comes and pushes towards, it is the place from which I work. It is a spacing where the opposites of Heraclitus and Parmenides meet, where free will and determination coalesce, where flow and stasis gather, where 'all things are one', to return to our first quote from Heraclitus. It is the still point of the turning wheel, the opening of the non-dual, the instant that the ascent of pedagogy points towards and then finds it always was. It is the key to my own thinking and experiencing of the educational moment and as such is more personal than what follows, and not necessary for understanding the stories, so I place it as an appendix and push towards what this long explanation has avoided – the stories themselves.



### Chapter Three: Plato<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Why start this thesis with Plato's writing, why not *The book of the dead*, *Gilgamesh*, *Inanna*, the books of Moses or the prophets, the *Odyssey*, the Pre-Socratics, Jesus, Paul? *Gilgamesh* after all is an educational narrative that demonstrates the growth of a personality into wisdom and Inanna travels through the depths and heights. The journey of the Hebrews out of Egypt into the promised land is replete with images of the ascent of the learning soul towards God as are the many other stories they tell, ranging from Moses on the Mount to Abraham and Isaac, Joseph's vision of the ladder, Job's suffering – the tales lie thick on the ground, polished with centuries of use. Homer's tales also sit at the heart of ancient learning, the narratives known off by heart and embellished in a thousand classrooms, replete with their own wisdom of living a good life in this world. Parmenides' great poem on Being also fits within the range of pedagogical narratives that take us from the depths to the heights, as do the great Greek tragedies. Then there is the foundational narrative of Jesus Christ, a story that starts on earth but involves the Highest of all High descending to the lowest of all lows, working the full range of extremes and all else between in a light of suffering and compassion, told in the form of a *life*. Then there is the putting of The Life into words and doctrine so that the message can spread from Jew to Gentile – the astounding story of Saul of Tarsus becoming Paul. All of these narratives could have been the starting point of this thesis, but they did not quite fit the need for a crystallized beginning that revealed the range pedagogy works from the depths to the heights in clearly formulated terms. All of the above stories have been used pedagogically to good effect for centuries, but none of them attempt within themselves a full articulation of the educational effects they are capable of producing. For good reason – Homer expounding on the merits of Odysseus being able to effortlessly string his bow would destroy the narrative effect. In the west, the Platonic corpus contains the first fully articulated vision of education that straddles the heights and depths and attempts to pedagogically move the reader within its own writing. Plato provides us with a narrative account of this educational journey from the shadows into the light, but this is buttressed continuously with clarifying principles and commentary – he both says and shows. The metaphor/narrative is made to work within philosophy. There were other educational philosophies within ancient Greece, but these do not have the same range of development, nor the same narrative drive. So it is with Plato that we begin.

The second question that then arose was the selection of texts within the Platonic corpus. The Early Socratic texts are famous for their pedagogical effect of *elenchus*, the *Protagoras* for the question of whether Virtue can be taught, the *Gorgias* for the representation of the educational claims of Rhetoric, the *Meno* for one of the first formulations of the hermeneutic circle in pedagogic form and its solution – recollection – in the experiment on Meno's young slave. Then there is the *Phaedo* with its description of how the body becomes an obstacle to knowledge and the recommendation of *katharsis*. And so we could

## Opening

In what dark place does learning begin, what luminescent heights can it reach, and what different paths can a learner take on a journey through this range? Where lies the dimness

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continue into the conditions for knowledge sketched out in the *Theaetetus*, indeed the whole corpus of Plato's work reads most strongly within a pedagogic register. There are undeniable shifts in his pedagogic strategies as we work through his collected works, ranging from *elenchus*, through to *recollection* and then into *maieutics*, and this to just name three. Each of these pedagogical strategies has had its defenders over the history of western educational thought, the *elenchus* of Socrates being the current favourite of our post-modern times. So why then did I choose to focus on the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*? The answer lies simply in the Ladder of Beauty found in Diotima's account of Love. It was in this image that I found the core of my thesis, for it described the journey of a learning soul from the beginnings of love into its very heart. Diotima provided me with the range I was looking for. It was less about specific teaching techniques and problematics and more about placing the educational drive within an integral vision that encompassed all of its myriad possibilities. From this point of vision, the selections of the *Phaedrus* and *Republic* were obvious. The first provided a phenomenological account of what it felt like for a learning soul to actually attempt an ascent of the Ladder of Beauty through its early stages in the famous image of the charioteer and his steeds. The second provided an extensive elaboration of the same range as the *Symposium*, except it worked with the fields of intellect rather than beauty, the path of knowledge rather than love. It also contained the most elaborate discussion of the levels of education necessary to produce a just soul. Furthermore, it provided an account of the descent of wisdom back into the cave of the everyday, paralleling the return of Love back into the ground of temptation found in the tale of Socrates and Alcibiades. Finally, the *Republic* provided a careful analysis of the *disintegration* of wisdom rather than its return to the cave, of how the heights of learning can collapse in on itself, falling down the very steps it has climbed.

With this in place I had an account of the first fully articulated educational journey that we have in the west. Not only did it cover a range from the depths to the heights, but it did so within the different modes of love and intellect, revealing what successful educational practice within both registers would look like, while also discussing the various levels of disintegration that accompany such a pedagogic enterprise and make it necessary in the first place. It is to this towering achievement sitting at the beginnings of our attempt to think what education entails that we now turn – for it spread its great wings far enough. In a way that is not surprising, all the stories told afterwards sit as footnotes to the foundational narrative told in this chapter.

that swallows a learner with ignorance and emptiness? Where streams the light that illuminates a student with truth, beauty and goodness? How can pedagogy take us from the depths of unawareness to the heights of self-knowing and what are the stages in-between? What does it take to fully educate human *being*? What is the full spectrum of development a learner can traverse and what effects do the different levels have on him? What are the social, political and economic contexts informing education? When can we finally say that the education of a student is complete, and then what does he do? Why do we educate, what is its purpose? It is in Plato<sup>2</sup> that we find the first fully developed

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<sup>2</sup> We find a direct voice in his Letters, but these are controversial and possibly faked, although the 7<sup>th</sup> Letter does give an autobiographical account, which, if a fake, is an exceptionally good one. We know that Plato was born in Athens in 428 B.C.E to a highly distinguished family and died in 347. Initially keen to pursue a political career he was put off by the corruption of the various Oligarchies and Democracies that rose and fell. Instead, he fell under the influence of Socrates and was deeply shocked when the newly restored Democracy put Socrates to death. I will use Plato's own words in the 7th letter to colour in this thumbnail sketch of his life.

Once upon a time in my youth I cherished like many another the hope of entering upon a political career as soon as I came of age... There were many who heaped abuse on the form of government then prevailing, and a revolution occurred...-and thirty came into power as supreme rulers of the whole state. Some of these happened to be relatives and acquaintances of mine, who accordingly invited me forthwith to join them, assuming my fitness for the task. No wonder that, young as I was, I cherished the belief that they would lead the city from an unjust life, as it were, to habits of justice and 'manage it,' as they put it, so that I was intensely interested to see what would come of it. Of course I saw in a short time that these men made the former government look in comparison like an age of gold. Among other things they sent an elderly man, Socrates, a friend of mine, who I should hardly be ashamed to say was the justest man of his time, to fetch a citizen to be executed...He refused and risked any consequences rather than become their partner in wicked deeds. When I observed all this ...I withdrew in disgust from the abuses of those days. Not long after came the fall of the Thirty and of their whole system of government. Once more, less hastily this time, but surely, I was moved by the desire to take part in public life and in politics... As it chanced, however, some of those in control brought against Socrates... a most sacrilegious charge, which he least of all men deserved. They put him on trial for impiety ... and put him to death... The result was that I, who had first been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the

written account in the western world of what it means to truly educate the human being, how to do it, the levels of improvement, the various contexts, and why it is important. He reveals to us the full extent of the pedagogic task facing a teacher who wishes to undertake the venerable occupation of caring for another's physical, mental, and spiritual development. Yet we will never meet this great teacher of Millennia for he always speaks through others (mostly his own teacher, Socrates, but many others<sup>3</sup> as well). It is to the teacher of Plato's teacher – the priestess of the mysteries, Diotima – that we will initially

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whirlpool of public life and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy...and finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad... Hence I was forced to say in praise of the correct philosophy that it affords a vantage point from which we can discern all cases what is just for communities and individuals and that accordingly the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers (*Letter VII* 324 b – 326 b).

Plato turned to Philosophy and the beautiful, immortal world of Ideas it offered. Initially he wrote dialogues that captured the enigmatic strength of his sacrificed Mentor, but slowly began to put his own developing ideas in Socrates' mouth, well traced by Vlastos (1994). In 388 Plato broke his political fast and took up an invitation to go to Sicily and work with Dionysius I of Syracuse. Details are shaky, but the whole attempt collapsed and Plato returned to Athens where he set up an Academy that became the first great philosophical school of the west. Its areas of expertise ranged from mathematics to natural history, biology and jurisprudence, with Plato the undisputed head. There he taught and wrote, briefly revisiting Syracuse to teach the young King, Dionysius II his vision of an ideal state in 367 and 361. These interventions failed and Plato continued to teach at the Academy and write until his death aged around 80, leaving the institution to carry on his teaching as well as his ideas, which have survived for over two thousand years to influence us still. Teaching was his main love and work, his writings coming second, for with the first he was engaged with living minds that sparked into flame. This is an intimidating picture of the calibre of the man, considering the influence his writings, so impressive that it is *damning to even praise him*, as his greatest pupil said.

<sup>3</sup> As Plato's own thought emerges more clearly from that of his Master, so he begins to use other leaders in the dialogues. Parmenides, the stranger from Athens, Pythagoras and Anaxagoras come to the fore as well as Socrates.

turn as Plato subtly discloses the full nature of the task contained in educating the learning soul. We will then build up an educational vision of the full spectrum of growth that opens out to the eyes of a learning soul<sup>4</sup> and the pedagogical techniques that assist in the opening.

### **The Ladder of Beauty**

Let us begin in a place where student and teacher meet, a place that holds in a disciplined middle ground the Bacchalian excesses of debauched drinking and the Apollonian pinnacle of virtuous ideals – a Symposium where friends and lovers gather to deliver edifying speeches, eat good food, drink some wine and have a good time. It is in this setting that Plato contrives to provide an account of pedagogy – of the guiding and training of a student in the ways of living a happy life filled with Truth, Beauty, Virtue and Love. He uses the speech of Socrates on the nature of Love to reveal one of the complex paths both student and teacher can travel to reach this ideal – the path of beauty. The account of Socrates is bracketed by four earlier speeches on love and the late arrival of the Dionysian Alcibiades after Socrates' discourse. It is only with both these brackets in place that the full impact of Plato's educational vision comes through.<sup>5</sup> So we will allow some of the wonder of Plato to take its effect by following his account of the Symposium closely with a special focus on the educational implications of the speeches.

The first speech asks us to imagine a community that consists only of lovers and their boyfriends (*Symp.* 178 a – 180 b). Envision the power of love in such a situation. All

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<sup>4</sup> I use the word soul to indicate that part of us located in between flesh and spirit, touching both, much as *eros* is imaged in this chapter as caught between the worldly and the Divine and able to travel towards both. It is also described by the image of the charioteer and his horses, found later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See Halperin's excellent article on the narrative form in the *Symposium* and how it leads to stories within stories in 'Plato and the erotics of narrativity', found in a couple of collections, one being J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith's *Methods of interpreting Plato and his Dialogues* (1992). Also superb on this area is Martha Nussbaum's 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of *The fragility of goodness* (1986).

would act in the most admirable of ways, driven by the twin powers of shame and honour – fear of shame in front of one’s beloved when behaving disgracefully; and ambition to impress one’s lover by acting honourably. Love would act as a social bond and instil virtue in all, resulting in a community to be respected, admired and feared. This is the vision of love given by Phaedrus, a pupil of the Sophists, a vision that looks to the practical effects of love in shame/honour and its social benefits, a vision that Socrates will later place within a broader spectrum of the pedagogy of love.

Is love as simple as that? Can we not divide it into common lust and virtuous love? Is there not a difference between leering after the body and considering the whole person? Is true love not concerned for the happiness of the loved one, for the improvement of his wisdom and virtue, rather than a mere ravishing? Does it not have an educational dimension? Should love not be a morally acceptable affair governed by a set of rules that leads the beloved to perfection in a pedagogical relationship that trades pleasure for goodness and wisdom (*Symp.* 184 d – e)? Especially in a relationship of instruction and edification between younger beauty and older wisdom, where both can offer the other so much, should there not be carefully laid down rules preventing the abuse of beauty by wisdom and the exploitation of wisdom by beauty? In the relationship between the wise man of influence and the handsome young student two sets of rules should meet – those of courtship and education – and in this charged space a morally acceptable exchange of physical beauty for virtue and wisdom occurs without the negative effects of lust causing pandemonium. Such is the speech of Pausanias on love and Socrates will later illustrate just how he views the nature of a correct relationship of love between teacher and student. The ideas of Pausanias capture the popular feelings in Athens on the intersection between Eros and pedagogy.<sup>6</sup> The unfolding drama of Socrates’ relationship with Alcibiades, his handsome, young student, will provide the test case that illustrates levels of education and Eros beyond the fashionable.

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<sup>6</sup> The best book on this area is Dover’s *Greek homosexuality* (1978).

'Do these rules not limit the greatness of love?' asks the third speech. Is love not the creative force of the whole world, of existence itself, filling and emptying in an inspired flow that expands forever outwards, pouring out in orgiastic streams that converge and diverge in the river called life? And in this great drama are there not arts of balance that understand how to harmonize the flows, of gaining the poise to hold difference in equilibrium. Do we not have great arts that work with these scales? Is not medicine 'the science of the ways of love as they effect bodily filling and emptying' (*Symp.* 186 c)? The body of every creature is pervaded by love and the art is to balance the flow, get the opposites to work together in a healthy fashion, rather than allow an unhealthy spilling over of excess or deprivation. It is the talent of striking a balance, of walking the golden mean, a musical score of love, one of harmony in opposites. Here we have the grand vision of Eryximachus, the doctor, who would want to heal the whole world with his healthy version of love, and it is a vision that Socrates will pick up on. For him, though, the question revolves around the healthy emptying and filling of the mind by a teacher rather than the healthy filling and emptying of a body by a doctor.

Does this cosmic vision with its grand generalizations not lose out on the specificity of love? Is love not more unique than this, is it not more about the relationship between two souls who have lost each other and finally been reunited? Is it not about two incomplete halves coming together as one? Surely love is more about the loss of wholeness and its attempted recovery in the arms of another. In a romantic past we may have been unified, but now we are scattered, lost in a yearning for unity, filled with lack. We search for the unnameable in the other, calling it a need for sex or declaring it in poetry, yet the demand is never fully met, leaving us in a world of desire with nothing quite suturing the gash. Love is just the name we give to the desire for, and pursuit of, wholeness (*Symp.* 192 e). As human beings we will never be happy unless we find perfect love, unless we come across the love of our lives and thereby recover our own original nature (*Symp.* 193 c). Of all the speakers, Aristophanes, the great comic poet, is alone on his couch, the others sitting with lovers and companions, and his comic image of the eight limbed human being split in two cannot hide the pathos of lonely desire for his other half on his empty

divan (*Symp.* 189 d – 191 c).<sup>7</sup> His rendering of love makes it beautiful, yet few find this true love, and those who do often destroy it themselves or have it taken away from them. In this aching for completeness he delivers a speech of poetic beauty, one that Socrates will show how to take to even greater heights that secure, broaden, and intensify the experience.<sup>8</sup>

After the deep truth struck by Aristophanes on the nature of the human condition, the speech of Agathon, the great tragic poet, is facile and glib, allowing the proper foil for the speech of Socrates to follow. He praises love to the heavens, making it possess all the virtues and beauty of a loved one, heaping nobility and justice on its pretty head, making it everything one could possibly desire and then more (*Symp.* 195 a – 197 e). There is an indiscriminate amount of praise that flows from the mouth of Agathon, making love as attractive and perfect as possible. Socrates quickly objects to this eulogy and prefers rather to tell the truth about love, not just flatter it, yet he carefully avoids damaging the feelings of Agathon by placing himself as also having held this sweet view on love until he was shown other wise by the high priestess of the mysteries, Diotima. It is in this account of what Diotima taught him about Love that we have the first full account of what the levels of pedagogy are. It is a speech that picks up on all the previous speeches in complex ways and synoptically places them within a broader vision. A synthesis occurs with Socrates that extracts what is true from all the other speeches and then holds

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<sup>7</sup> Here we see the comic genius of Aristophanes – we all become eight limbed creatures when making love to our beloveds – then the sadness bites as we recognise the desperate attempt to make ourselves one again in the arms of an-other.

<sup>8</sup> The three major passages of Plato looked at in this chapter – Diotima’s speech, the charioteer with his steeds, and the Cave Metaphor – all exist at points where philosophy becomes poetic. Where the limits of language are reached in expounding the higher levels of love and knowledge, Plato shifts register and uses poetic devices to capture experiences beyond language – the seeing of pure beauty, the flow of love between two souls and the seeing of The Good. Language slips at these points more than it does in its normal functioning, forcing the articulator to use various strategies to image the wordless. One of the best ways to cross the deep sea of beauty is with Poetry.

them together in an integral vision that transcends but includes them, placing them in a spectrum of development that works from the beginnings of love in the overpowering desire to possess one beautiful body to immersion in a sea of beauty and a final glimpsing of pure Truth and the virtue it gives birth to.

Picking up on Aristophanes, Socrates points to the basic truth that Eros is a desire for something one lacks. It has an inkling of the heights and knows the depths, but it strives in that liminal space between heaven and earth, between full knowing and ignorance. It occupies middle ground, a ground that has tasted but not reached. It is the great facilitator between the divine and the worldly, between wisdom and unawareness, between the gods and man.<sup>9</sup> In this intermediate world Eros is *both* and *neither* and as such can communicate *between* apathy and ecstasy. It is a great spirit, a *daemon*, able to allow communication in the opening between the heights and the depths that otherwise would not touch each other (*Symp.* 202 d – 204 b). It is both emptiness and fullness, always filling up with the divine while spilling out onto the earth. It is a man-god, a god-man. All this Eros might be, but the question remains – of what use is it to us as human beings? In

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<sup>9</sup> Socrates tells the story of the birth of Love as follows – ‘The gods were celebrating the birth of Aphrodite, and among them was Plenty, whose mother was Cunning. After the feast...Poverty turned up to beg, so there she was by the gate. Now, Plenty had got drunk on nectar...and he’d gone into Zeus’ garden, collapsed and fell asleep. Prompted by her lack of means, Poverty came up with the idea of having a child by Plenty, so she lay with him and became pregnant with Love. The reason Love became Aphrodite’s follower and attendant then, is that he was conceived during her birthday party; also, he is innately attracted towards beauty and Aphrodite is beautiful. Now, because his parents are Plenty and Poverty, Love’s situation is as follows. In the first place, he never has any money, and the usual notion that he is sensitive and attractive is quite wrong: he’s a vagrant, with tough dry skin and no shoes on his feet... He takes after his mother in having need as a constant companion. From his father, however, he gets his ingenuity in going after things of beauty and values, his courage, impetuosity, and energy, his skill at hunting..., his desire for knowledge, his resourcefulness, his lifelong pursuit of education, and his skills with magic, herbs, and words. He isn’t essentially either immortal or mortal. Sometimes within a single day he starts by being full of life in abundance, when things are going his way, but then he dies away...only...to come back to life again’ (*Symp.* 203 b – e).

order to fully comprehend the great gift Love offers, and the worth of pedagogically striving towards what it tenders, it is firstly necessary to existentially see into the heart of the human condition. Plato captures what it is for us:

[A] person in fact never possesses the same attributes, but is constantly being renewed and constantly losing other qualities; this goes for his hair, flesh, bones, blood, and body in general. But it's not just restricted to the body: no one's mental characteristics, traits, beliefs, desires, delights, troubles, or fears ever remain the same: they come and go. But what is far more extraordinary even than this is the fact that our knowledge comes and goes as well: we gain some pieces of information and lose others... Forgetfulness is the leakage of information, and practice is the repeated renewal of vanishing information... (*Symp.* 207 d – 208 a).

We are leaking all the time, forever in flux, never the same, always in a state of renewal that never repeats the state before it exactly. Allow me to take a more personal register over here. We are not immortal, we are born in death, decaying from our first breath, forever mutating in a sickly dance towards our own oblivion. We are mortal. There's only Death.

I will die

I am dying,

sleeping out life in a world that hums its own momentariness. Every moment on earth is different, nothing is the same, it reworks itself a million times in every heartbeat, never to be repeated but always pushing towards its own reproduction in death. It comes to be and fades away in an eternal flux that is haemorrhaging. All is lent. The pupils you teach, they are leaking, the knowledge you impart, it is leaking, the paper you read this on has already bled and is bleeding more. The ink is mixed with tears. There is a stink of mortality in the air, everything is decaying, desperately trying to stay alive by killing and consuming and then excreting out the waste while it continues on in its embrace of death. We vanish, we Vanish. The torment of life; fear etched in a face with its beauty departed;

the Night bringing only emptiness to the longing of a bare figure in pain. We are the return address of pain. The illusion that we are constant and never changing must be broken so that the nature of our earthly existence stares us down – it is becoming, not Being. Only then will the pedagogic effect of Love begin to take effect, and what it offers consume our interest.<sup>10</sup>

In this state of seeing into the heart of mortal existence, ambition and shame pale in their ability to hold a community together, an individual lover's breath suddenly smells sweet with decay, an omnivorous skull hangs under the cosmos, draining its life force. Death, all is death. In this state there is a longing for immortality, for stability, permanence, incorruptible happiness. With death comes desire – desire for immortality. As mortals the only way we can get anywhere close to immortality is through reproduction (*Symp.* 208 b). It may not leave what it was precisely behind, but in its similarity it allows for a semblance of the Great Undying. Immortality projects are all we have: our children carry on our faces and attributes to a world that has already devoured us; our institutions carry on policies instituted in our name after our actions have been forgotten; poetry and art carry the beauty we felt inside to new generations as we rot in our graves. As human beings we search for some medium to procreate within, and the importance of the act to us means that we seek out the most beautiful and healthy medium possible for birth to occur within so that it can withstand the ravages of time for as long as possible. We search for something, or someone, beautiful enough to facilitate the reproduction of ourselves in an-other. Many men opt for physical reproduction through children, searching for a beautiful woman to procreate within.<sup>11</sup> A more lasting birth occurs when

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<sup>10</sup> In this passage I have taken freely riffs from various poets, but the best formulation I know of is Robert Graves' aching poem of two lovers caught in frail awareness of their own mortality – *Counting the beats*. It ends 'Counting the beats,\counting the slow heart beats,\ the bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats,\ wakeful they lie' (Washburn and Major [1997] 1193).

<sup>11</sup> The Greeks felt that in procreation the man is the stronger and dominates the pregnancy, with the woman only carrying. A personal note is needed to say that I do not subscribe to any of the chauvinistic viewpoints

mental ideas and virtues are carried from teacher to student in a loving relationship (as sketched out by Pausanias). A man, long pregnant with knowledge and virtue, searches for an attractive student in which his ideas can find fruition – ideas that, if well born, last far longer than children can (*Symp.* 209 c). We begin to glimpse a Ladder of Beauty that needs to be climbed in an ascent continually facilitated by Love, a facilitation that fills up with passion and then disappoints and moves on to a higher level in a dialectic of desire. It is a ladder that works from the individual, concrete, and temporal to the universal, abstract, and timeless – for *everything* passes, The Good never changes. The attempt to take a student up this Ladder of Beauty is what pedagogy is in its essence. Socrates' account of how to go about this repeats what he heard from his own teacher and has been immortalized in countless texts and practices afterwards.

'The proper way to go about this business' she said, 'is for someone to start as a young man by focusing on physical beauty and initially – this depends on whether his guide is giving him proper guidance – to love just one person's body and to give birth in that medium to beautiful reasoning. He should realize next that the beauty of any one body hardly differs from that of any other body, and that if it's physical beauty he's after, it's very foolish of him not to regard the beauty of all bodies as absolutely identical. Once he's realized this and so become capable of loving every single body in the world, his obsession with just one body strikes

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that prevail amongst the ancients and medievals. We will meet with many teachers of the learning soul who are female in the journeys chosen like Diotima, Sarah, Rebecca, Beatrice, and Rosalind. They stand equal, if not 'superior' to Socrates, Virgil and Prospero within these tales. Furthermore, there is a fair amount of gender swapping in these texts as the soul is often referred to as female, making many of the men in the stories 'feminine' as they reach inwards and upwards. Granted this is because the Ultimate Form is imaged as male, but there are subtleties underneath this, as we see with Eckhart showing us how to become both virgin and wife. Often the experiences of highest learning use the register of united love between man and woman, or mother and son (as Augustine experienced at Ostia) as their key. All of this mitigates the chauvinism of these authors. Yet as many subtleties as there are within these tales, there is an undoubted prejudice against women within their pages and off them, as we see in how the wives of Dante and Shakespeare were treated. As a male I feel this weight, but have also felt the intuitive sensitivity that comes with the internal path and the opening of the feminine within.

him as ridiculous and petty. The next stage is for him to value mental beauty so much more than physical beauty that even if someone is almost entirely lacking the bloom of youth, but still has an attractive mind, that's enough to kindle his love and affection, and that's all he needs to give birth to and enquire after the kinds of reasoning which helps young men's moral progress. And this in turn leaves him no choice but to look at what makes people's activities and institutions attractive and to see that here too any form of beauty is much the same as any other, so that he comes to regard physical beauty as unimportant. Then, after activities, he must press on towards the things people know, until he can see the beauty there too. Now he has beauty before his eyes in abundance, no longer a single instance of it; now the slavish love of isolated cases of youthful beauty or human beauty of any kind is a thing of the past, as is his love of some single activity. No longer a paltry and small-minded slave, he faces instead the vast sea of beauty, and in gazing upon it his boundless love of knowledge becomes the medium in which he gives birth to plenty of beautiful, expansive reasoning and thinking... (*Symp.* 210 a -d).

A clear hierarchy emerges that includes a previous stage and then transcends it, a hierarchy that expands to gracefully include more and more within its ambit, slowly imparting beauty to everything that crosses its inclusive spiral upwards towards the *klimax*<sup>12</sup> of immortality. The ladder increases in both depth and breadth as it expands upwards, actually more like an inverse pyramid than our everyday version of a stepladder.<sup>13</sup> The individual beauty of a single lover is not forgotten, only properly placed in a world that is also beautiful.<sup>14</sup> To focus in on individual beauty in a mortal world is to

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<sup>12</sup> *Klimax* is the Greek word for ladder, and we see in its resonance how at a certain point the ladder dissolves in a sea of ecstasy.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Ken Wilber's elaboration on the mechanics of this inverse pyramid in *Sex, ecology, spirituality* (1995) chapter 2.

enter suffering, not only because the magnificence of the rest of existence pales, but because that particular manifestation of beauty is also destined to wither. The achingly comic speech of Aristophanes starts us on a path that goes from finding love in an individual to a recognition of love's wider ambit as revealed in the cosmic speech of Eryximachus, while the pedagogic suggestions of Pausanius begin to show the structure of an educational relationship that will enable such a journey, a journey that goes beyond being inspired by the shame and ambition of Phaedrus, but does so without the sopiness of Agathon. It is a journey that takes us into a multi-dimensional and multi-cultural world-view where all individuals, institutions, cultures and ideas are respected and admired for the beauty they contain within a structured hierarchy. It is the taking of a larger view. It is a journey away from a selfish focusing on one's own particular experience of beauty. This is the danger of encountering beauty in a specific form, it seduces you with its charm, makes you focus on it to the exclusion of everything else, convinces you that 'this' is the most exquisite and complete experience one can have and cuts you off from the wide dark sea of beauty all around. It swallows beauty within itself and leaves you convinced that once you have found it, nothing else can match up to it. This is its danger – it kisses and wounds. Still, it holds a manifestation of beauty and encourages profound thoughts, but it must be placed in the ocean of beauty it swims within, seen as Beauty's child. Hold onto the individual expression of beauty, but see its charm in relation to the radiance that flows all around it – such is the teaching of Diotima.

On a common sense level what is being said is obvious and well known. The blush of love spreads outwards. Falling in love makes the whole world fresher, brighter and sweeter. Yet the aroma of beauty that surrounds young love tends to collapse inwards again. The toll of the everyday on romance, and the danger of caprice taking one's

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<sup>14</sup> This shift from the individual to the world can also be achieved by valorising the individual to such a height that her beauty spills over into the rest of the world. Here the technique is not 'include and transcend' but 'saturate and overflow', a technique Petrarch perfected with the seeing of his loved one alive in the clear water and on the green grass and in the trunk of a beech tree and in a white cloud etc. etc. See his *Canzoniere* (1999). It is the path of obsession and narcissism that leads into the Renaissance and the Romantics.

beloved away, can replace beauty with anxiety, marring the happy flow. Diotima understands both the beauty and danger of individual love. It is a chancy affair, giving and taking away happiness. Her Ladder of Beauty reveals a pedagogical path that can be taken to transcend the luck and tragedy of individual love.

A further consequence of the vision up to now is that the *autonomy* of the lover increases as he ascends the ladder while his levels of *commitment* expand. As higher levels are reached, the lover is able to work in ways that increasingly release him from previous bonds. Seeing that many are beautiful releases the lover from exclusive dependence on one body. Seeing that institutions and principles are beautiful releases the lover from dependence on bodies.<sup>15</sup> Each release brings with it an expanding area of commitment, until, with the final vision of The Good, the lover is freed from all particular bonds yet finds himself committed to all, as we will see later with the Cave Metaphor. For now, let us return to the heights of Beauty.

At this stage in Socrates' speech he has already placed and gone beyond the speeches before him, but he is really only warming up, and again we will allow the words of his teacher to spill over us as it has done for more than two millennia.

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<sup>15</sup> The great theorist of community Josiah Royce captures the early stages of this process as follows:

...our ideal extensions of the self, when we love the community, and long to realize its life with intimacy, must needs take the form of acting *as if we could survey*, in some single unity of insight, that wealth and variety and connection which, as a fact, we cannot make present to our momentary view. Since true love is an emotion, and since emotions are present affections of the self, love, in longing for its own increase, and for its own fulfilment, inevitably longs to find what it loves as a fact of experience, and to be in the immediate presence of its beloved. Therefore, the love of the community (a love which, as we now see, is devoted to desiring the realization of an overwhelmingly vast variety and unity of co-operation) is, as an emotion, discontent with all the present Sunderings of the selves, and with all the present problems and mysteries of the social order. Such love, then, restless with the narrowness of our momentary view of our common life, desires this common life to be an immediate presence for all of us.

(Quoted by Lentricchia in *Modernist quartet* [1994] 39)

‘Try as hard as you can to pay attention now,’ she said, ‘because anyone who has been guided and trained in the ways of love up to this point, who has viewed things of beauty in the proper order and manner, will now approach the culmination of love’s ways and will suddenly catch sight of something of unbelievable beauty – something, Socrates, which gives meaning to all his previous efforts. What he’ll see is, in the first place, eternal; it doesn’t come to be or cease to be, and it doesn’t increase or diminish. In the second place, it isn’t attractive in one respect and repulsive in another, or attractive at one time but not at another...depending on how people find it. Then again, he won’t perceive beauty as a face or hands or any other physical feature, or as a piece of reasoning or knowledge, and he won’t perceive it as being elsewhere either – in something like a creature or the earth or the heavens. No, he’ll perceive it in itself and by itself, constant and eternal, and he’ll see that every other beautiful object somehow partakes of it, but in such a way that their coming to be and ceasing to be don’t increase or diminish it at all, and it remains entirely unaffected’ (*Symp.* 210 e – 211b).

The art of pedagogy is to take the student on a path that expands his love of beauty until he touches immortality. If the teacher has herself already travelled the path, then any unnecessary appetite for sexual gratification or satisfaction of ambition falls away in the recognition of true beauty and the desire to impart it to others. What else could make teaching worthwhile than to take your student on a path that shows him how to see true beauty, a vision that provides the ultimate reason for living, for it is immortal and imparts meaning to everything else?

This is the shimmering vision of Diotima that the older Socrates remembers hearing when sitting at her feet as a young man. She revealed to him the nature of pedagogy – the art of understanding the necessary stages to go through on a path that facilitates seeing the Still Main of Beauty. It is a course that Socrates in his younger years had not fully

worked through. As her pupil then, he was still caught up in the earlier stages, as Diotima had wisely pointed out to him (*Symp.* 211 d). The young Socrates still got overly excited by the sight of an attractive boy, was immersed in the particular and the sexual, the concrete and the physical, and had not yet glimpsed beauty itself, immaculate and pure. He had not yet fully become a lover of the Light, had not seen the Beauty that drives out the Dark. It meant that the younger Socrates was still subject to the code of conduct prescribed by Pausanias joining together education and courtship. Yet it is precisely this code that needs to be transcended if a teacher is ever to reach the heights of pedagogic practice. How does this higher kind of teacher act and respond to his beautiful, young students, does he accept the offer of physical beauty in exchange for wisdom? It is with these questions in mind that we meet Alcibiades,<sup>16</sup> the most beautiful and desirable of

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<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum gives the best modern description of Alcibiades that I know of so I will quote parts of it from the beginning of her stimulating essay 'The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the Symposium' in *The fragility of goodness* [1986] Chapter 6.

He was, to begin with, beautiful. He was endowed with a physical grace and splendour that captivated the entire city... He was always highly conscious of his body, vain about its influence... Energy and intellectual power had made him one of the best commanders and strategists Athens had known, one of the most skilful orators ever to enchant her people.... Once he invited a philosopher to dinner and told him the truth about a particular soul... He betrayed two cities... One night he went for a walk through the streets of Athens and defaced the statues of the gods, smashing genitals and faces...'

Nussbaum's reading of the *Symposium* is extra-ordinarily brilliant (as all her work is), but I find myself in almost continual disagreement with her emphases. In her essay it is almost as if she has fallen in love with Alcibiades herself, and gives an account of his speech as if it counterbalances that of Socrates, rather than as providing a test case for the level of Love and Teaching that Socrates has attained. Plato understood the power of Alcibiades, but he was not seduced by it in any way, and placed it within a hierarchy of Beauty that he had no doubts about. For Nussbaum, Socrates flattens everything out into a quantitative sea of beauty, making everything comparable in terms of quantity. The point I prefer to emphasize is that a sea has depth, and that Alcibiades is tossed on its waves while Socrates calmly surveys all. Socrates and Alcibiades are not counter-weights, they exist in a spectrum that only Socrates comprehends fully, hence his superiority. Nussbaum can rightly disagree with this whole viewpoint on Love as a hierarchy, but this becomes dangerous when she argues for Plato not holding it as his premier insight into life, for it is amply attested to

Socrates' students, and it is in the pedagogic relationship between the two of them that we see the art of pedagogy working on the highest of levels.

Alcibiades arrives at the Symposium already drunk and pandemonium erupts. He is encouraged to also give a speech on love but insists that the only person he will deliver a eulogy on is Socrates. He is so drunk that what comes out is the most honest, affecting, searing, and heartfelt description of what Socrates meant to him as a teacher and who Socrates is as a person. Yet it is also a test case for everything Socrates has said about the nature of pedagogy and love. When at the feet of Diotima he craved the beauty of young boys, and now here, in full flesh and sexual splendour is the most gorgeous of Athenian men. What effect has the teaching of Diotima had on her student Socrates, will he be able to transcend the Dionysian beauty of Alcibiades and if he can, what is the nature of the new pedagogic relationship that works beyond anything described or hinted at in the previous speeches? Let us follow Alcibiades' account and see what he made of a Socrates that has reached the heights of Eros and now embodies it.<sup>17</sup> In the process, the effect of this kind of education will be shown rather than stated, demonstrated rather than argued for, pointed towards rather than articulated.

To understand the nature of Socrates, Alcibiades maintains, one must open him up and look inside and there you will find an image of the gods.<sup>18</sup> He is able to reveal this

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in the *Republic*, the sister work to the *Symposium*. It has much to do with her liberal multi-cultural standpoint – so well articulated in *Cultivating humanity* (1997) – and the inability of this outlook to work correctly with hierarchy due to the flattening effect of over-emphasizing multi-cultural difference.

Alcibiades reminds me of Rimbaud and his genius poem *The Drunken Boat* – floating on the sea of beauty in an intoxicated frenzy, aesthetically attractive but so damaging in the long run.

<sup>17</sup> The speeches before were about Eros the god, after Socrates' description we think of him as in-between god and man, and as Alcibiades goes through his speech we are now hearing about the incarnation of Eros in Athens – Socrates.

divinity through mere words, words that are so powerful, that even when repeated in second and third hand reports, they still have the power to overwhelm and spellbind listeners (*Symp.* 215 d).<sup>19</sup> Alcibiades, when hearing the words of Socrates, found himself wrapped in ecstasy – heart pounding, tears flooding – while at the same time feeling deep within himself the inadequacy of how he was conducting his life. Yet Alcibiades was not a compliant victim to the magical words of Socrates, he was a robust and stubborn student, refusing to give up a life of ambition, fame and indulgence for eternal beauty. He feels the shame of an inadequate lover who does not live up to expectations, who chooses the adulation of the many over the more lasting entry into immortal beauty that his only true teacher recommends and reveals. Alcibiades might like the idea of the divine, and feel its force, but he prefers to wander around in the quicker pleasures of sex and power with the refrain ‘not yet, not yet’ easing his way. Such a student, so charismatic, handsome and talented would be a worthwhile type for a wise man to educate in exchange for bodily favours. Alcibiades suffered under no illusions and was happy to effect just such a deal with Socrates – body for mind. To this end he undertook the seduction of Socrates, a task that should not have been too difficult, given Socrates’ proclivity for handsome young boys and the good looks of Alcibiades. He contrived to get Socrates alone in his house so that a private space could be created for the bold declarations of lovers. Yet Socrates’ actions in private were no different from that in public. Not to be put off, Alcibiades next arranged to meet with Socrates at the

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<sup>18</sup> The actual example given is of opening up a Sileni statuette (*Symp.* 215 a). None of these have survived, but Selinius was the mythical teacher of Dionysius, and as such is very apt to use as a description of Socrates who is the teacher of Alcibiades, the embodiment of Dionysius. Other names also add to the subtlety of the text. Diotima means ‘Zeus Honour’ and as the ‘mistress’ of Socrates she compares interestingly with the mistress of Alcibiades, Timandra, meaning ‘man honour’ (Nussbaum [1987] 177). We will use the meaning of names to educate the learning soul in the next chapter on Philo.

<sup>19</sup> The *Symposium* is written as if it is a third hand account, but even so, its words hold their power because of the truth they contain. This seems to be the main reason behind Plato’s complex framing of narrators. It does not matter how distant the account, the power holds – witness us receiving it after millennia. It is this thought that gives me some comfort when trying to give an account of such an astounding vision and resting in its power.

Gymnasium and wrestle together with no one else around. Socrates still did not respond in any way different to usual. A determined seducer, our Alcibiades, he finally decided on a direct assault, and, as he tells the story so well, let us leave it in 'his' words.

So I invited him to dinner with me and...kept him talking far into the night after we had finished eating, and when he felt it was time to go, I pointed out how late it was and made him stay. So he settled down to sleep on the same couch he'd used at dinner, which was next to mine. And we were the only people sleeping in the house (*Symp.* 217 c – e).

No prizes for guessing what Alcibiades is going to attempt next, but before he goes into the account of his attempted seduction, he agonizingly points to the desire that was driving him towards this point. He had been struck and bitten by philosophy to the point of madness and ecstasy, and wishing to gain its powers at any means, was prepared to attempt the 'worst'.

When the lamp had been extinguished and the slaves left the room, I decided to cut out the frills and come right out with my thoughts...

'I think you are in love with me,' I said, 'and that you're the only lover I've got who's good enough for me. You're too shy to bring it up in my company, so I'll tell you what I feel. I think it would be stupid for me not to gratify you in this and in anything else you want (*Symp.* 218 c).

Now this is precisely the type of physical love that the younger Socrates had been under the spell of when being taught by Diotima, and here was its most beautiful embodiment offering himself in exchange for an education in wisdom and goodness, an exchange well recognised as fair by Athenian standards. Yet Socrates responds with what Alcibiades sees as mock modesty.

'My dear Alcibiades,' he said, 'it looks as though you really are no ordinary person. Suppose your opinion of me is actually true and I do somehow have the ability to make you a better person. You must find me remarkably attractive, then, with a beauty that is infinitely superior to your own good looks. Now, if this is what you see in me, and you then try to make a deal with me which involves us trading our respective beauties, then you're planning to do quite a bit better than me out of it; you're trying to give the semblance of beauty and get truth in return... But anyway, I think you'd better have a closer look, otherwise you might make the mistake of thinking I've got something to offer. I tell you, it's only when your eyesight goes into decline that your mental vision begins to see clearly, and you've got a long way to go yet' (*Symp.* 218 d – 219 a).

As in most situations this charged, Alcibiades has not really been listening to Socrates that carefully, and confident in his own beauty, he takes the bold step of taking off his warm winter coat and placing it over Socrates, before climbing into bed with him. It is with a pained voice that Alcibiades continues the tale.

I put my arms around this remarkable, wonderful man – he is, you know – and lay there with him all night long... And after all that, he spurned and disdained and scorned my charms so thoroughly, and treated me so brutally...that I got up the next morning, after having spent the night with Socrates, and for all the naughtiness we'd got up to, I might as well have been sleeping with my father or an elder brother (*Symp.* 219 b – d).

It is obvious that Socrates had learnt well from Diotima – the physical beauty of Alcibiades could not stand ground with pure Beauty.

From a pedagogic point of view certain features remain peculiar. Why did Socrates not clearly put to Alcibiades the nature of his error, dispel his illusions forcefully, rather than allow the poor man to climb into his arms and lie awake in the warmth of brutal

rejection? Why cryptically respond to Alcibiades' offer with a story about eyes declining and mental vision. Why protest too much about not really having anything to offer when knowing that just such talk is what happens in foreplay between lovers humbled by the beauty of the other? These are questions that have puzzled readers over the ages and led to some brilliant answers that are pedagogically illuminating.<sup>20</sup> But it is often the simple points that are worth remembering. The Socratic pedagogical maxim is 'know yourself', and this is a work that only one person can do – 'yourself'. It is not contact between the 'gold' of an enlightened mind and the 'bronze' of a student that leads to the vision of The Good, the Beautiful, and the True. It is only when a student undertakes the self-exploration necessary to begin the path that proper teaching can begin, and this Alcibiades has not yet done. Whether the teacher uses irony or brutal demonstration, true teaching does not begin until the student takes responsibility for his own learning and begins to explore and understand who he is. The teacher cannot just give wisdom, like any commodity, to a student in exchange for money, sex, admiration, honour, or anything else. He can only act as a guide in the student's own exploration of his inner world, only point the way. As the circle of beauty widens from the individual to the ocean of beauty that is existence, true beauty is only seen within, in a glimpse that does not look to any outward manifestation, but in a moment of total concentration catches something abstracted from all physicality, shining within one's own mind in an eternal and unchanging way.<sup>21</sup> There is no other place to find this ultimate beauty but within one-self.

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<sup>20</sup> Vlastos, in particular, gives a nuanced account of the irony involved and its pedagogic effects, especially in his brilliant *Socrates, ironist and moral philosopher* (1991). See also his 'Socratic irony', *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987) pp79–96.

<sup>21</sup> Plato takes this abstract world, found phenomenologically by going inside, and makes of it a complete world in its own right existing beyond the heavens in ontological transparency. As pure souls we have seen this clear world and then forgotten it in the embrace of materiality. Thus education becomes a remembering of something long forgotten but contained within our deepest self – as famously argued for in the *Meno* with its foundational question – can Virtue be taught – and its famous answer that the 'truth about reality is always in our soul... and one must take courage and try to discover – that is, to recollect – what one doesn't

Alcibiades still has his mind fixed on externals and has not turned his mind around into itself, and thus has not even begun to walk the inward path upwards. By brutally demonstrating to his student the paleness of the exterior beauty he holds so dear, Socrates is attempting to break the hold that physicality has on Alcibiades, and push him into a reflective stance on his own behaviour. Only when eyesight goes into decline does mental vision begin to see clearly. Socrates wants to turn Alcibiades around, stop him pouring his energy into the seething world of time and change, and channel that energy inwards, into the still point that offers a glimpse of immortality and widens beauty outwards from an individual point towards all of existence, and then finally towards the unborn world of Being itself. It is towards this World that we must push, Plato argues, a pure world of Forms that exists as our first World and from which this temporal world has spun out.

### **The Phaedron Charioteer and his Steeds**

Clearly Diotima succeeded in turning around the soul of Socrates from physical to immaterial beauty. Alcibiades, on the other hand, failed to make the full transition, and stayed caught up in a mixture of the various beauties of becoming. What the *Symposium* does not give us is a phenomenological account of the difficulty of such a transition. It reveals the stages, provides us with the majesty of a successful example (Socrates) and the flawed beauty and uniqueness of a failed example (Alcibiades), but where is the

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happen to know, or, more correctly, remember, at the moment' (*Meno* 86 b). It is an incredible claim, that within us all is a memory of a pure world of Forms, that through Philosophy one is able to remember this world by using techniques to enter one's soul, and in so doing, find the Wisdom and Virtue that was always already inside you and exists in pure form outside of you. It is not a claim that suddenly all the knowledge of the world and its making will come upon one, but that the soul contains within its highest element an experience of Pure Being, and this can be reached by going inside oneself. Should a person manage to access in his depths the heights, he could be called divine. If such a man was further able to teach Virtue and reveal it to others 'he would be among the living practically what Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, when he described him as the only one in the underworld who kept his wits – 'the others are mere flitting shades'. Here we have the beginnings of the Cave Metaphor, its seeding found ironically in the great Poet Homer (*Odys.* 10, 494). The journey from the shadows to the light and back again is an Odyssey, but one transformed into philosophic form.

sweat involved in such a difficult journey up the Ladder of Beauty? We find such an account in the *Phaedrus* and its famous allegory of the charioteer and his steeds.

In this delightful dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus go for a walk in the countryside and discuss the nature of love. Phaedrus is greatly taken by a sophistic text on the subject<sup>22</sup> and this provides the pretext for Socrates to give an account of Love and how it leads lovers to the Divine. Love is a kind of heaven sent madness, 'fraught with the highest bliss' (*Phaed.* 245 c) and to understand its nature one has to go into the depths of the soul. Socrates characterizes the soul as self-moving and therefore eternal. Many things are moved by other things in a cause-effect relationship, but before all this, at the start of the chain, there must have been something that moved without having a cause, a first mover. It is a source and principle of motion for all other things. It must have contained motion as an inherent part of itself, without cause, otherwise it would not be the necessary first principle needed to get the ball rolling. It must have always been moving, it never came to move at a certain point, it always was and is in motion. If it spoke it would say 'Never have I not existed'. Such an immortal thing is the soul. It is the eternal within us, something that never started and will never stop as it contains within itself the principle of self-motion. It is not born, it does not die, having been it will never not be. The soul is new and always new again. If the principle of the soul is self-movement, its nature can be characterized as a charioteer with two winged horses who together ascend to the heights of the Divine. This presents no difficulty for the gods who have good horses to ride the heavens, the problem arises for man as only one of the horses is of good stock,<sup>23</sup> the other

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<sup>22</sup> Lysias argues for a favouring of a non lover over a lover for friendship and guidance. A person in love is mad and damages his loved one through various actions that are directed at ensuring possession. Socrates elaborates and improves on this account in his first speech (*Phaed.* 237 a – 241 d), showing how a lover attempts to reduce the otherness and independence of a loved one to suit his own desires. Socrates immediately regrets his own sophistic account and undertakes to give a genuine account that is inspired by the muses. It is in this second speech that we find an internal account of the difficulties involved in the earlier stages of ascending the Ladder of Beauty.

not,<sup>24</sup> making the charioteers task difficult. At best, and with much disciplining of the unruly steed accompanied by much rising and sinking, the divine is sometimes glimpsed, sometimes not. But many, although eager to see the heights, get trampled underfoot by the attempt to compete until, with wings broken and legs lamed they fall into materiality and have to feed on the food of semblance (*Phaed.* 248 a – b) rather than truth. Yet even in this world of images and shadows there is beauty, and this worldly beauty reminds the fallen of a greater beauty that has been lost, a beauty that can ‘give you wings’. This is the peculiarity of beauty in the world of becoming, it retains enough energy to inspire a re-growth and remembrance of things lost, of a world once glimpsed before the fall. It is able to pierce the heart without arrows.....using strands of beauty. This provides the impetus needed to begin the disciplining and educating of the soul.<sup>25</sup>

Initially, when the driver (intellectuous) sights a beautiful person, he immediately feels warmth through his whole soul and the beginnings of desire. The good steed (courageous part/thymos) modestly holds back but the bad steed (desires/epithymia) leaps forward, desperate to fulfil its craving, immune to whip and command. All it desires is immediate gratification through a violent ravishing, and it pulls the other two along until they get close to the beloved and indicate their desires in the pseudo form of wanting to undertake the beautiful person’s education. At the sight of the beautiful beloved the driver suddenly

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<sup>23</sup> ‘He that is on the more honourable side is upright and clean limbed, carrying his neck high, with something of a hooked nose; in colour he is white, with black eyes; a lover of glory, but with temperance and modesty; one that consorts with genuine renown, and needs no whip, being driven by the word of command alone’ (*Phaed.* 253 d).

<sup>24</sup> ‘The other is crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature with thick short neck, snub nose, black skin, and grey eyes; hot blooded, consorting with wantonness and vainglory; shaggy of ear, deaf, and hard to control with whip and goad’ (*Phaed.* 253 e).

<sup>25</sup> This is one of the most powerful articulations of the deep forces that drive pedagogy. It resonates across the western tradition. To meditate on how this formulation was interpreted two thousand years after its articulation one only has to read Marsilio Ficino’s Renaissance elaboration on the Phaedran Charioteer and see how an idea lives across time. See Allan’s *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran charioteer : introduction, texts, translations* (1981).

has a memory of the form of beauty in its purity and in awe he falls on his back, wrenching the reins back with him and pulls both steeds down onto their haunches. The good steed feels only shame and horror at what is happening, the bad steed rants and raves about how cowardly the others are. Eventually the bad steed works up enough strength to pull the other two towards another meeting and offer of 'educating', and as soon as the beloved is sighted, 'with head down and tail stretched out he takes the bit between his teeth and shamelessly plunges on. But the driver, with resentment even stronger than before...jerks back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse..., bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood, and forcing him down on legs and haunches delivers him over to anguish' (*Phaed.* 254 d – e). This process happens again and again until the wanton steed is forced to give up his lustful quest and eventually shakes with fear when seeing the beloved. It is in this disciplined condition that the lover now meets with the beloved, a state of pure love that is concerned with the welfare of the other without desiring to reduce him to an object needed to satisfy desire, a place where union can happen without violation. The beloved is amazed by this, for he has found a companion 'in whom there dwells a god' (*Phaed.* 255 b). The beauty of the beloved now enters the soul of the lover and fills him completely until, able to contain it no more, it flows back outwards, and 'as a breath of wind... rebounding from a smooth hard surface, goes back to its place of origin, even so the stream of beauty turns back and re-enters the eyes of the fair beloved' (*Phaed.* 255 c). Plain heart sees into plain heart. The lover has become a mirror that reflects back the beauty pouring in, allowing its healing stream to restore the wings of both souls so that together they can engage in the philosophic quest for pure Beauty and the Truth and Goodness it leads to. It is a quiet moment of union with your beloved, a moment unaware of anything outside or inside, a moment that passes beyond sorrow.<sup>26</sup> This is how erotic love, properly handled and purified, results in

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<sup>26</sup> The immortal lines of Dante capture this:

but when I raise my eyes to yours  
my heart is seized with shuddering  
that from the bloodstream drives my soul.

the education of both lover and beloved, and their final release from the bonds of becoming into the realm of Being in each other. They see each other in a deeper, more real way, for they see each others souls shining through. Such is the unforgettable experience of In-sight.

### **The Cave Metaphor**

If the *Symposium* offers us a first take on the full complexity of the pedagogical task facing the teacher, and the *Phaedrus* a phenomenological account of the effects of erotic love and beauty on the education of the soul, it is the *Republic* that develops a full vision of the education of the human soul, and as such exists as the most influential book written on pedagogy in the western tradition. It has a complex potency that intimidates almost all commentators and a hermeneutic work that has interpreted its message for centuries.<sup>27</sup> Our interest in its passages is slightly different, however, for we will pick up on how it fills in the vision given to us by Diotima and leave it there. Just as at the hearts of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* lie the diamonds of Diotima's wisdom and the struggle of the charioteer, so does the *Republic* open out to reveal at its centre an image of the Divine in the Cave Metaphor. The *Republic* is about the education of the soul. The vision of a political utopia is a large-scale image of what the human soul looks like. The difficulty of discussing the nature of something as intangible as the soul means that Plato looks for a larger model to work with, a State, that acts as an analogy for the Soul. It is a dangerous ploy, for a State works differently to an Individual. Crucially, it does not have a central locus of consciousness, but works by getting many independent consciousnesses to work together. It cannot instruct a whole range of people to do something and expect it to just happen, the way our minds get our bodies to do things, and the way atoms in our bodies

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(Washburn and Major [1997] 410)

The history of Eros as the vision of the beloved transformed through love is well told by Catherine Osborne's *Eros unveiled: Plato and the god of love* (1996).

<sup>27</sup> An excellent select bibliography of the latest interpretations is given by Robin Waterfield in the beginning of his superb translation of the *Republic* (1994).

automatically move with us. To expect total compliance is tyranny. This opens up a massive area of debate surrounding the *Republic*<sup>28</sup> but we will skirt this issue by sticking to Plato's brief – the State is an enlarged model of the soul, and all discussion in the last instance refers to the Individual Soul and not a Collective State. It is about the education of the human soul and it is this that we will hold continually in front of us as we walk through its encapsulating image – Plato's Cave Metaphor (*Rep.* 514 a – 517 a).

For the learning soul to begin a journey towards the light, we need to know the conditions it starts within. Plato describes our initial state as being tied down by chains and forced to look in one direction only, towards the dark end of a cave where shadows play on the wall, cast from a fire behind. All the captives have ever experienced is the dance of shadows, so naturally it is their reality. There is no questioning of what is going on behind them to cause such a display, for it has never been seen. To turn around and look is impossible because of the stocks riveting vision towards the production. We are in this state in our everyday consciousness, it is our normal, taken for granted existence at its most elementary level that Plato is capturing.<sup>29</sup> In this Wasteland we are wrapped up in

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<sup>28</sup> Of course Plato was writing on a number of levels in the *Republic*. He is attempting to provide a vision that is worked out in all the dimensions that matter in the living of a worthwhile life. These dimensions operate in individual and social ways, as well as in interior and exterior aspects. It is what makes the *Republic* a true work of genius. My point is that this integral vision uses the logic of interior development to understand the functioning of social and political spheres, and that this is a dangerous mistake. The logic of the social is different from the logic of the individual. The logic of the internal is different to the logic of exteriors. It all holds in a great chain of being for Plato that is dominated by the logic of the interior development of an individual for it is through this avenue that the Forms are accessed. The most famous mistake Plato makes in this vein is the one that Aristotle insistently points to – a making of the universals discovered by the mind a separately existing world beyond this one.

<sup>29</sup> Technically, our everyday consciousness is symbolized by everything that goes on in the Cave, thus including the released prisoners who wander about in the cave and see the fire and the models. The difference between bound and unbound prisoners is the difference between unnecessary desires dictating our lives and making us captive to them, and a control of desires by ordering them into necessary and

externals, our vision fast tracked on the play of physicality as it ebbs and flows through existence. We are bound tight and then driven by our physical desires and the manifestations they demand to satisfy them. Our eyes look outwards, always searching for meaning in the world that presents itself to us, taking its manifestation as being everything that is real, genuine and true. We chase after its satisfactions and riches, pouring ourselves into it, investing what we are in it, naming it, interpreting it, valuing it, twisting it to suit our desires. It is this everyday behaviour that Plato is describing as being like a prisoner mistaking shadows on a dark cave wall for reality.

The key point is that there is no recognition of being a prisoner in this state. It is experienced as freedom, and indeed, the captives are free to make what they will of the display in front of them, free to warp the shadows to assist satisfaction. It is a freedom held in chains by the illusion that the shadows are the only possible reality to be interpreted and investigated. It is a freedom that allows for any and all attempts to satisfy desire so long as the attempt stays on the level of immediate physical gratification. Within this ambit, the variety is enormous – quick promises flash across the wall, offering immediate pleasure and satisfaction, whether these are advertised in the realm of sex, food or drink. Go towards death with swill in your mouth. This is where we begin the educational journey, this is the world of shadows where images proliferate without any reference to the real, where signifiers slide across the wall and only make sense in relation to other signifiers. In the room the shadows come and go. The dream lies like the truth. There is nothing of substance, a tyranny of unnecessary desire holds sway in dark conceit.

It is only the person who has genuinely seen the shadows for what they are – shadows – who can teach. And the only way to understand the nature of shadow is to understand the form that causes it along with the light that illuminates, otherwise all one is doing is playing with more shadow. What the learner must do is turn around and look into what is

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unnecessary desires, and allowing a satisfaction of both in a more ordered fashion as one moves about the cave.

causing the display. It is a wheeling around of the whole person from being focused on the instability and momentariness of existence towards a more stable force that lies behind the jazzy production. As the learning soul turns from the outside world of display to the inner and more abstract world producing it a journey out of the cave begins that echoes the *Symposium's* Ladder of Beauty and its shift from the physical to the intellectual.

The first thing a prisoner set free from the manacle of images sees are the objects that cause the shadows. In Plato's complex image he has people carrying objects on their heads walking a path between the fire and the prisoners. These objects are models of things out in the real world, beyond the cave. So the first stage of the ascent towards the light consists of correctly seeing through the nature of shadow by seeing the models responsible for casting the shadow. What was taken to be real now becomes a likeness to the real object, it is seconded to the role of imitation. The level of depth increases by one as the learner moves towards the light. This logic is repeated continuously – what was initially taken as real is carefully examined to see if it too is not just a copy of an original, until eventually the true original is found. In the first stage of the educational journey, shadows are seen for what they, images cast by something more real. What is not clear is the status of what it is that casts the shadow. Clearly, this 'more real' object is itself a copy of something 'more real' outside the cave but the cave dweller does not know this yet, he is still struggling to make out what this new world and its objects are. Even the firelight is dazzling and obscures his attempt to see the models responsible for the shadows. Yet slowly this new reality stabilizes, with training and discipline the shadow lover is able to identify the new objects seen although he does not yet know that these new objects are things made in imitation of the world outside the cave. A Hierarchy of Being slowly emerges. It is a richer world that the cave dweller now moves within. Not only does he work with models of reality rather than flickering images of images, he can also see the fire that lights the whole cave up.

Just as we should be surprised by our everyday world being captured in the image of a bound cave dweller seduced by shadows, so should we now feel taken aback by our initial conversion and seeing the light as only being that of a cave fire illuminating models – we have not even left the cave yet and seen the real world. The cave is a metaphor for the physical, material world we live in. We have not left the world of becoming, only been set free to understand its workings more clearly and control the most illusory of its desires. Our everyday world of becoming is illuminated by the sun, just as the cave is lit up by a fire. Even the clearest seeing of the nature of this physical world exists as an equivalent to wandering about in a cave admiring the craftsmanship of models. The celebration of existence in all its richness and beauty is only cave worship, ignorant of a more splendid world beyond it. It is a carnival – a democracy of desire holds where both necessary and unnecessary desires are tasted and enjoyed without any appreciation of a higher and more beautiful world lying up the slope.

Yet if the cave represents the world as we know it, then what on earth can be meant by the world outside the cave. Clearly it is not a physical world that can be touched, tasted and smelt. It must be something beyond physicality and materiality. It is an abstract, immaterial world, but for Plato it is the most real of worlds, a world that contains truth, beauty, goodness as its very Being, a world that never flickers or sways, an eternal world of Being beyond this timeful world of becoming. The pressing pedagogical question that arises is how to introduce the learning soul to its delight, of how to take the cave dweller to the mouth of the cave so he can stumble upon the whole sea of beauty out there in the ‘real’ world of Being? It is a question of how to shift a student’s interest from the visible towards the intelligible, from models and shadows to abstract ideals and the perfect Forms that have produced our everyday world. It is an education of abstraction. This is a difficult task, for students still desire the satisfactions offered by the cave with its models and shadows, as we saw with Alcibiades. Besides this, looking into the higher reality that opens out at the cave mouth is a blinding activity, especially when it is only the physical world of becoming that we are used to contemplating. It is light stunned by Light. The student would still feel that this new world outside the cave is actually the imitation of the

'real' world of the cave. He has only have a shaky grasp of its movements and forms, and this unfamiliarity makes this new world appear ghostly and vague. Much practice would be needed before the student was capable of contemplating the Forms in themselves, initially the cave will continually pull the student back with its brunette attractions. Slowly, with diligence and discipline, the student will begin to discern the nature of this higher world, initially recognizing the *shadows* thrown in this new world by its objects, then make out *reflections* of men and objects shown in mirror like fashion by still waters. Gradually the actual objects will emerge for contemplation, and be seen as the actual cause of shadows and reflections. Abstract ideals and principles will begin to emerge as worthy of emulation and honour.

A dialectical process takes place, with the student continually searching for a deeper reality that underlies the object contemplated, continually questioning assumptions and abstracting until the deepest reality is attained. An integral vision will begin to unfold that correctly holds gradients of reality in the proper perspective until the student is finally able to turn his eyes heavenwards and contemplate the generating source of light that illuminates everything. Initially this gaze upwards will only be possible at night, revealing the starry heavens eternally looking down on us until finally the student is able, in a concentrated stare, to contemplate the very source of everything in its shining purity – The Good, that which sits at the heart of existence in the purest, most abstract state. This cosmological glance upwards was more than just a metaphor for Plato. The stars, in all their precise, never changing, beauty, revealed the pure world of Forms – a divine world beyond the corruption and disintegration of the earthly world below. (Hence the problem of the wandering planets took on a special significance for Plato as it threatened the divine order of his system. But he never stopped believing that there was a simple and clear principle functioning beneath the apparent rootlessness). He will have come upon Eternity, the Glory, the Un-deposed, Beauty flashing Love, the Powering, the Widening. Once this utmost level of contemplation has been reached the student will, for the first time, truly understand the full nature of existence in all of its complex depth and height and understand how it all fits together. He will have come to a full understanding of The

Good, the Beautiful, and the True as well as the murkiness of the Cave. The levels of existence will hold together in a graded Ladder of Beauty that includes and places all in a hierarchy that ranges from darkness to light, concrete to abstract, image to reality, becoming to Being.<sup>30</sup>

Only once pedagogy has taken the student from the depths to the heights can the true nature of this world of becoming be seen. Now the student understands the nature of the cave. Its attractions and fulfilments become paltry in comparison to this newly illuminated world that always was and is. He would rather be a serf in this glorious sphere than king of the shadows. In this newly illuminated world he will see grades of abstraction, running from the principles of courage and honour, virtue and justice, to the Form of The Good that informs all. Yet an obligation awaits all who have ascended to the heights, it is the call to return to their fellows still captured by elementary desires in the

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<sup>30</sup> This vision has its equivalent in Plato's conception of the Universe, mapped out in the *Timaeus*. It is astounding to think that this playful text of Plato's old age was the only text that carried his voice through the early middle ages. In it we meet a Pythagorean astronomer who tells the story of the universe. He tells of a creator who made this world of becoming. 'He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be... Now the deeds of the best could never be or have been other than the fairest, and the creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole could ever be fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole, and again that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best' (*Tim* 29 e – 30 b). A nested hierarchy exists in creation, moving from body to soul to intelligence, a hierarchy that we can move through using the modes of beauty, love and knowledge to gain apprehension of The Good using our highest faculty – intellect. In modern terms we can think of how a child moves from thinking in Images (resemblance), to Symbol (correspondence not necessarily in form of image), to Concept (classes of resemblance and correspondence abstracted into Forms). What Plato is saying is not so esoteric in its earlier stages, as Piaget, Kohlberg and other developmentalists attest to – only in his later reaching for The Good do our modern maps of development struggle. The open question is whether this is due to our latest theories not having sailed far enough or Plato having gone overboard. See Wilber (1995) chapters 1–8 for an excellent discussion of these issues.

Cave and assist them on the journey upwards. It is the call to teach, a call fraught with difficulty, a call to return from the monad to plenitude, from principle to application, from contemplation to praxis. Firstly the teacher mostly has no desire to return to the cave, preferring the beautiful world he has worked so hard at achieving. Secondly, his fellows have no desire to leave the cave, indeed, they have no understanding of what this new world is. It will all sound like a madman's talk to them. Thirdly, as the teacher enters the cave of becoming again, he will find himself blinded anew, unable to even see the shadows so easily worked with before. He will seem idiotic to the shadow lovers, even more stupid than before he left their company. Or he may find himself seduced by the shadows again, recalled by the attractions of the flesh. As Propertius beautifully intones –

How she let her long hair down over her shoulders,  
 Making a love cave around her face.  
 Return and return again.<sup>31</sup>

The Cave is a beautiful place, it is only in a widening and deepening reality that it becomes shallow. The danger of such an undertaking for the lover of Light, and resistance to it from the lovers of Shadow, is so profound as to risk the very life of the descender as he attempts to turn the prisoners around, as witnessed by the death of Socrates. These are the conditions a teacher of the heights faces: his own personal reluctance; a blindness to the shadows that comes from looking at the sun for too long; seduction; and concerted resistance from those who do not see themselves as bound at all. It is difficult to turn back on a dream. In the journey of the learning soul from time to eternity, from becoming to Being, he reaches a testing point where he has to return to the everyday world as a teacher who holds the whole spectrum of existence in view so that everything becomes illuminated by its source of illumination. He has to set his shoulders against the dark. This is the pedagogic vision of Plato.

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<sup>31</sup> The opening lines of his poem *O best of all nights, return and return again*, in Washburn and Major (1998) 164.

The Cave Metaphor is exceptionally suggestive and has been a generating image for much of the inspired heights of western thinking over the last two thousand years.<sup>32</sup> It is

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<sup>32</sup> It keys into the basic structure informing the western canon – the journey from the shadows to the light and back again is an *Odyssey*, but one transformed into philosophic form. As influential as the Cave Metaphor is, it partly gains its strength by standing on the strong shoulders of Homer. The poetic imagination is more able than philosophy to characterize the heights, dangers and excitement of such an undertaking, and so Plato turns to myth and poetry when reaching certain points. Just as Odysseus is guided by Tiresias, who is able to prophesy the route, the stages of the journey, and how to reach home across the teeming seas (*Odys.* 10, 539–540), so does the Ladder of Beauty and the Cave Metaphor point the way to the learning soul. In both there is a descent into the depths and the pain involved in being there. Odysseus attempts to embrace the spirit of his mother and ‘like a shadow or a dream she slipped through my hands and left me pierced by an ever sharper pain’ (*Odys.* 11, 206–209). He is able to listen to the high clear songs of the Sirens only by lashing his body to the mast. He even reaches the land of the Sun, only to have his crew destroyed by the lusts of the flesh. Finally he lands up in the land of Immortality with the beautiful nymph Calypso. Yet in all his adventures through the depths and the heights, Odysseus longs for a return to his wife and son. The land of immortality only makes him shed tears for his lost home. ‘The Nymph had long since ceased to please. At nights, it was true, he had to sleep with her in the vaulted cavern, cold lover, ardent lady’ (*Odys.* 5, 152–157). There is a longing to return to the everyday world, a world that Homer lovingly captures in all its details in ways beyond the capacity of Philosophy, but in both the necessity of a return after seeing immortality is made clear. When Odysseus returns to his homeland, he is not recognised and appears as a beggar. Furthermore he faces the danger of all the suitors who have been left behind, gaining strength in his absence, who plot to kill him. So too does the lover of light return to the cave to find his appearance altered into that of a fool, to find many waiting in the darkness to destroy him, unprepared to listen to the tale of Gold he has brought back with him. What Homer does in mythical form, Plato does in philosophic form. Each register has its virtues and faults. With Philosophy we have a cold lover, clear minded and precise; with Myth we have warm blooded action, loud and vulgar (plus a stomach always to fill). Plato attempts to tread a path beyond both by transforming philosophy into poetry at key moments. It is this attempt to combine myth and philosophy, poetry and logic, story and argument, that I find so fascinating and will attempt to describe – beautiful stories told by philosophers about the journey of the learning soul through the depths and the heights.

often used by academics as a tool to illustrate their own brilliance,<sup>33</sup> but it is essentially an image to help us think through 'the human condition – for our education or lack of it' (*Rep.* 514 a). It effectively takes us through the grades of reality, clearly expounded by the Sun<sup>34</sup> and Line<sup>35</sup> metaphors, in an engaging and emotionally charged way. Plato

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<sup>33</sup> A good diagram is found in C.D.C Reeve's excellent book *Philosopher Kings*. It shows the four basic levels of reality using the Line Metaphor and then shows their correspondences in the Cave Metaphor as well as the attendant epistemic, psychological and desirous states. For those who enjoy mathematical preciseness there is the clear formulation of Strang in his 'Plato's analogy of the Cave.' *Oxford studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 4 (1986) pp19–34.

<sup>34</sup> The Sun Metaphor makes a clear distinction between visible and intelligible realms. Just as the sun is the source of light and fruition, providing the light that assists the eye to see, so is The Good the source of truth and reality, accountable for our ability to know and knowledge itself. When the object of a mind is lit up by truth and reality, 'then it has...intelligent awareness and knowledge. However, when its object is permeated with darkness (that is, when its object is something which is subject to generation and decay), then it has beliefs and is less effective, because its beliefs chop and change... What I am saying is that it's goodness which gives the things we know their truth and makes it possible for people to have knowledge' (*Rep.* 508 d – e). The cave is the world of darkness and becoming, outside the cave is the intelligible world of knowledge and the Goodness that makes it possible. It is a strong claim, knowledge only comes from the intelligible world, and it is only seen in the light of goodness illuminating it. The object of education is to turn the eye of the soul around so that it can be flooded by the light of Being rather than the darkness of becoming.

<sup>35</sup> The Line Metaphor gives a clear grading of reality from becoming to Being. It will help to refer to the diagram of Reeve to follow. Take a line (AB) and divide it into two unequal parts (AC and CB). The larger part (CB) represents the Intelligible world, the smaller part (AC) the visible world. Now divide each part again by the same ratio used for the entire line so that CB and AC now both contain divisions that mimic the division. We now have CE and EB as well as AD and DC. AD represents the shadows of a visible world and DC the actual objects in this world of becoming. So AD is the shadows and reflections of the objects in DC. Likewise in the intelligible world of CB, CE contains images of a higher reality contained in EB. CE is the world of mathematics. It thinks through the logical consequences of abstract objects and thus trains the mind to see in an abstract manner, but it is still tied to images in that it uses visible figures to visualize what the mind is thinking through on an abstract level. Mathematics is also forced to treat its definitions as true, rather than questing for the founding principle that goes beyond all definitions. EB is the world of Ideas got to through Dialectic where eventually a state is reached in which nothing is taken for

walks us through the depths and the heights. This is its key function. It is one thing to reveal levels of reality ranging from the concrete to the abstract, from becoming to Being, from the born to the Unborn. It is completely another to chart in a meaningful way an individual's engagement with these levels. The levels of reality will always exist in an eternal spectrum, impervious to various climbers up and down its hierarchy. It is the task of the Line Metaphor, in particular, to reveal this fourfold reality in a clinical, clear fashion. The task of the Cave Metaphor is to directly illustrate the phenomenological effects of engaging with these levels in an educational manner that effects an upward spiral towards The Good and a descending return to the phenomenal world. It is to the elaboration of this that we must now turn.

With such a grand vision in front of us it is easy to claim too much for what education can achieve. Alcibiades expected something like a direct downloading of Wisdom from teacher to student, something that Plato felt to be both damaging and dangerous to both student and teacher. Education does not pour stuff into students in the manner of blind eyes being filled with light (*Rep.* 518 c). The eyes of a soul can already see, it is just that they are looking towards darkness and shadows rather than light. The capacity for knowledge is always already there, it is what the student is doing with this capacity that is

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granted and the starting point of everything is discovered (*Rep.* 509 d – 511 c). We will see Descartes attempt something similar later on in his *Meditations*. As the shadows of AD are copies of the visible world of DC, so too are the mathematical discoveries of CE the images of the Ideas of EB. Just as the sun illuminates the world of visibility, so goodness illuminates the world of intelligibility. Four states of mind correspond to the four sections. The highest level of Dialectic uses the highest level of thought – *nous* or intellect. Mathematical thought uses understanding or *dianoia*, seeing objects in the world of becoming uses sense perception and because it comes and goes, can only be opinion, or *pistis*. Finally the world of images works with complete conjecture or *eikasia*. Starting from the bottom, each section is a copy of that above it until we reach that which has no copy – the original of originals – The Good. There is an important subtlety that needs to be held in mind with the Line Metaphor that carries over into the Cave Metaphor. Just as conjecture is an image of opinion, so is understanding an image of intellect. So conjecture and understanding are 'shadows' of opinion and intellect. Furthermore, conjecture and opinion together are a shadow of understanding and intellect taken together. This is clearly brought out by Strang and his mathematical formulation of the Cave Metaphor.

crucial. The task of education is to devise the simplest and most effective manner of turning the mind away from its fascination with the world of becoming and make it capable of bearing the sight of real Being, which in its essence is The Good. It is to live the Soul. Education becomes the art of correct alignment, of proper orientation, of turning the mind around (*Rep.* 518 d – e). It works with the mind, a mind has the peculiar ability to never lose its power, it can always see, but what is of importance is what it contemplates – becoming or Being...or both.

But the mind does not come alone into the world. There are consequences attached to entering this mortal coil. Leaden weights fasten onto the mind as a result of the need to sustain a dying organism. We have to eat, drink and procreate to survive and these pleasures tend to pull our vision downwards into the flux of unnecessary desires, breaking our wings. Education thus has to begin at an early age, hammering at the chains of desire and indulgence until the mind is freed to turn around and begin the upward ascent to the light with the desires in harness (*Rep.* 519 b). Initially this is the task of Music (cultural studies) and Gymnastics and that is why it is crucial to be exceptionally careful about what children read. The great poets may hold aesthetic appeal, but if employed in primary education, their work must be censored, altered, and rearranged so that they can correctly fulfil the task of realignment. It is pointless using an unaligned poem to orientate a child's mind. It falls to primary education to produce a healthy person who is well balanced and in harmony with himself and the world. All resources must be sifted through to ensure that they encourage this effect. It is an education in character building, in enabling a person to function effectively and virtuously in this everyday world. It is an education within the Cave. It enables the darkling to increase his depth by one, to gain control of his desires and wander around in a useful way throughout the world of becoming.<sup>36</sup> The question remains as to what kind of education would enable a

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<sup>36</sup> As the learner increases his depth by moving from shadow to image, a simplification of the earlier state occurs as it is placed within a more encompassing vision. For example, the desires of the released prisoner are seen to contain necessary and unnecessary components. As he moves upwards, he simplifies his desires

leaving of the Cave and an entering of the Light, of how to close the route of the senses and open up the road to the Invisible.

Plato's famous recommendation is that of Mathematics. It is an education in abstraction, a shifting of focus from the visible to the intelligible, from becoming to Being. It awakens reason and provides tools for its strengthening until eventually the soul can make a leap towards a level of reality beyond Mathematics – Goodness. In working with numbers it deals with a phenomenon not encountered in the physical world, for there is nothing in the world that has every single unit exactly equal without any remainder (*Rep.* 526 a). It thus forces the mind to rely on intellectual, rather than physical, processes. Slowly mathematics is able to build up an intelligible world, beginning with a single stream of numbers, expanding this into two-dimensional geometry, then the volumes of three-dimensional space and finally the nature of solidity in motion (Astronomy) (*Rep.* 526 a – 528 d). In the same way that a cave leaver has to slowly acquaint himself with the new world opening out in front of his eyes – building up from shadows to reflections to objects to contemplating the heavens – so must the student of mathematics build up the dimensionality of the intelligible world he is being introduced to. Even the mathematician must be on guard against his vision spiralling downwards into the physical realm. For example, what tends to happen in Astronomy is the beauty and regularity of the stars takes the mind away from the greater abstract beauty of pure number and form (*Rep.* 529 b – d). The lifting of the learning soul into the heights entails a purging, a complete separation from the physical world, so that a pure contemplation of essence can occur.<sup>37</sup>

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by keeping the necessary ones and purifying himself of the unnecessary ones. The same process happens when honour and then reason become the uniting principle, until all that is necessary has been kept and ordered within an increasingly deeper system. It is not a losing of desire but its correct training and placing so that higher desires can be reached. Certain texts like the *Phaedo* point to a more austere vision of the body and the need to transcend it. It is just a living corpse causing difficulty in the reaching upwards of the Intellect towards the Divine. It points to an insistent tension in the Platonic corpus and the stories that follow, but as the *Republic* contains Plato's most developed psychology, I keep to its suggestion that all have a place if they perform their correct functions within a hierarchy.

Once this is achieved, a sea of knowledge opens out to the learning soul. If he manages to work in a totally abstracted world, everything unwraps itself to measurement. Whether it is Music, Astronomy or Geometry, total abstraction allows a great sameness to descend.<sup>38</sup> An affinity between all subjects reveals itself, uncluttering the student's mind and enabling it to see the awe-inspiring relation of everything to all. An integral vision develops that is able to take in levels of reality as well as having a tool to work across these levels. Yet all of this is only a prelude for the final great leap of learning, it is all only preparation for the best part of the mind to reach out for the best part of reality (*Rep.* 532 c). This is the great discipline of Dialectic whereby 'without relying on anything perceptible, a person perseveres in using rational argument to approach the true reality of things until he has grasped with his Intellect the reality of goodness itself' (*Rep.* 532 a – b). It is a process of actively questioning assumptions until an Archimedean point is reached. Even Mathematics, the technique that turns the mind from the physical to the abstract, has to work with definitions and assumptions that it does not question. The nature of a point, of a number, or of a line is defined but how they came about is left unanswered. 'There is no chance of their having a conscious glimpse of reality as long as they refuse to disturb the things they take for granted and remain incapable of explaining them. For if your starting-point is unknown, and your end-point and intermediate stages

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<sup>37</sup> A similar mistake is made in music where, in an attempt to understand resonance, 'they bring their ears close to the source of the sound – as if they were trying to hear what the people next door were saying! And then some of them claim to be able to detect a further intermediate resonance and maintain that they've found the smallest possible interval, which should be used as the basis of measurement, while others dispute all this and claim that the notes in question are to all intents and purposes identical. But both camps rate their ears above their intellect... They limit their research to the numbers they can find within audible concords, but they fail to come up with general matters for elucidation, such as which numbers form concords together and which don't, and why some do and some don't' (*Rep.* 531 a – c). Our modern attempt to work with the Intelligible in music (Schoenberg) shows that it might be possible to do this, but the ear might not enjoy the results!

<sup>38</sup> This insight will receive a powerful dualist articulation in Descartes as he clears the world of all differences and measures all extended substance with the clear and distinct rules of mathematical physics.

are woven together out of unknown material, there may be coherence, but knowledge is completely out of the question' (*Rep.* 533 c). Mathematics can only dream about true reality, it is Dialectic that enables the final lifting upwards into The Good. In a radical doubting of all assumptions, in a searching for the context behind the context, in a quest to expose all roots, in a tearing away of all theory and conjecture, a sudden flash of insight comes with pure mental clarity. A limit point of the thinkable is reached, and as the mind attempts to work at this end point it is abruptly thrown into a world beyond assumptions, a first world, a world that makes assumptions possible.

It is a peculiar process, on the one hand thought expands outwards, including more and more within its grasp. At the same time it radically simplifies and abstracts as more and more contexts are held within generating principles. Its end result is more than a founding assumption, it is what makes founding an assumption possible. The student finally apprehends the truth and beauty of The Good. Plato does not describe the nature of this state, for words or images could only be an image of what it is, so he leaves it unspoken,<sup>39</sup> waiting for those students who are prepared to climb the ladder and recognise it for themselves.

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<sup>39</sup> 'I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. Besides, this at any rate I know, that if there were to be a treatise or a lecture on this subject, I could do it best...If I thought it possible to deal adequately with the subject ...what finer achievement would there have been in my life than to write a work of great benefit to mankind and bring the nature of things to light for all men? I do not, however, think the attempt to tell mankind of these matters a good thing, except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance. In the case of the rest to do so would excite in some an unjustified contempt in a thoroughly offensive fashion, in others certain lofty and vain hopes, as if they had acquired some awesome lore' (Letter VII 341 c – e). See Findlay's *Plato: the written and unwritten doctrines* (1974) for an extended exploration of this aspect of Plato's work. The nature of The Good is therefore left as a black whole, containing all, attracting all, but beyond words. It can be made manifest, it can be shown, but it cannot be said without compromise. The place where searchers

It is an arduous curriculum. To become a teacher one firstly has to undergo the primary education of Music and Gymnastics until 18, then intensive military training for a couple of years. 10 years should then be spent in the mathematical sciences, beginning the shift from the tangible to the conceptual. Dialectic is then actively practiced from the age of around 30 to 35 to eliminate all assumptions and direct the student to the First Principle that informs all. Only then is a student ready to begin the descent back into the Cave as a teacher of others. This lasts for 15 years until the teacher illustrates an ability to work correctly in the world of shadows, until s/he is able to teach in the cave in an illuminating way. The blindness of light entering darkness becomes a 'blind' filtering the light within the shadows.<sup>40</sup> At this stage the teacher\student is equally comfortable in the world of becoming and Being, skilled in working on the interface between the two, unblinded by the continual shifts of perspective needed. Two worlds become one world, the world of becoming and Being hold together in a seamless whole. Only then, at the age of around 50, can they be guided to the climax of their lives. 'You must make them open up the beam of their minds and look at the all-embracing source of light, which is goodness itself. Once they have seen it, they must use it as a reference-point and spend the rest of their lives ordering the community, its members, and themselves' (*Rep.* 540 a – b).<sup>41</sup>

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after The Good looked for an account of its nature was in the *Parmenides*, especially in its discussion on the Form of the One, although here too Plato points out its ineffability (*Parm.* 142 a). It will take the genius of Plotinus to show how to describe the One and a sustained effort of thousands of monks working over the centuries to begin to understand how to stabilize the experience, yet much of it is contained in the terse dialectical puzzles of the *Parmenides* (and the cosmological speculations of the *Timaeus*). These two texts were considered by the ancients to contain the heights of Platonic metaphysics, precisely because of their sustained discussions of the nature of the One in its timeless non-duality. We will explore the form of the One specifically in the chapter on Plotinus and continue throughout to build up a picture of the heights of education reached in the non-dual experience of the One.

<sup>40</sup> Thank you to Derek Mahon for this wonderful conceit, found in his poem *First Love* in his *Selected poems* (2000). The line is 'This is a blind with sunlight filtering through'. Some of his phrases echo through this thesis, as do many other poets.

It is an education of self-transcendence. The self preserves itself at a specific level, bound to repeating patterns that sustain its particularity. These patterns are worked on with pedagogic techniques designed to make the self aware of higher and more lasting patterns, and assist the self to accommodate itself to these forms. The self makes the transition by a creative leap of transcendence, where instead of seeing these patterns as something it must become a part of, it eventually includes the pattern as a working part of itself. Include and transcend. It increases its depth by climbing up the ladder of evermore-lasting harmonies, until it reaches the pattern of all patterns – The Good, and then All flows.

It is a pedagogy of illumination. It may start with shadows, but the education goes from light to Light, from fire to sun, from attractive physicality to beautiful abstraction. There are also pedagogues of darkness who reveal the ‘negative’ path of the soul that moves from darkness to Darkness. St John of the Cross reveals how the soul journeys to its Beloved at Night in his exquisite poem, *The Dark Night*.<sup>42</sup> Plato teaches in the realm of

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Each of you must, when your time comes, descend to where the rest of the community lives, and get used to looking at things in the dark. The point is that once you have become acclimatized, you’ll see infinitely better than the others there; your experience of genuine right, morality, and goodness will enable you to identify everyone of the images and recognise what it is an image of. And then the administration of our community will be in the hands of people who are awake’ (*Rep.* 520 c).

<sup>42</sup>

1. One dark night,  
fired with love's urgent longings  
- ah, the sheer grace! -  
I went out unseen,  
my house being now all stilled.

2. In darkness, and secure,  
by the secret ladder, disguised,  
- ah, the sheer grace! -

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in darkness and concealment,  
my house being now all stilled.

3. On that glad night  
in secret, for no one saw me,  
nor did I look at anything  
with no other light or guide  
than the one that burned in my heart.

4. This guided me  
more surely than the light of noon  
to where he was awaiting me  
- him I knew so well -  
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
the Lover with his beloved,  
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast,  
which I kept wholly for him alone,  
there he lay sleeping,  
and I caressing him  
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When the breeze blew from the turret,  
as I parted his hair,  
it wounded my neck  
with its gentle hand,  
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,  
laying my face on my Beloved;  
all things ceased; I went out from myself,

illumination, it is a journey of increasing luminosity that we work within, much like the light on light of Dante's *Paradiso*, as we shall see.

It is an elitist curriculum. Not many students reach these heights or manage the return into darkness. Many do not even begin to turn around and remain captive to their appetites and the flitting pleasures they bring. Others manage to turn around, but remain in the Cave, happy to live out their lives fulfilling their civil, familial and personal duties according to the folk wisdom of the time. Some manage to climb to the mouth of the cave and see an immaterial world of higher principles and values. They begin to understand the value of institutions, the principles they embody, and are prepared to honour and fight for them in courageous ways that leads to an improvement of society. Only a few manage to finally turn their minds towards The Good and see the informing principle of everything that exists and truly love the Wisdom it develops. Out of the very few who reach these heights even less find the empathy and love to return to the cave to assist their fellows in the difficult journey of the learning soul upwards to the light. Of those who do return, some are blinded by the darkness and can never see shadows correctly, others are seduced by the shadows once more and embrace their chains. Of the very few still left, some are destroyed by those in the cave too threatened to allow the message, leaving a precious minority able to teach in the cave after seeing the Light of The Good. There are no apologies from Plato for this. It is an immensely difficult path, obviously many will fall by the wayside. The danger is that we transpose these suggestions into a curriculum for society and not see it as an account of the education of the human soul. The philosopher king who manages to see The Good is our Intellect at its clearest. The physical and cultural education of the guards represents the training of the

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leaving my cares  
forgotten among the lilies.

I quote the poem in full from the *Collected Works* (1979) as we will pick up on its cadences throughout this thesis, but especially in the chapter on Origen and the *Song of Songs*.

Competitive\Courageous Part. The shadow lovers represent our emotions, needs and desires in their necessary and unnecessary forms, depending on how bound to the shadows they are. It is a metaphor that speaks to the individual in all her complexity as a teeming mix of factors and points out a pedagogical path that leads, by progressive stages, to the pure happiness that comes from entering the beauty and truth of The Good. The return of the philosopher king to the cave is about the difficulty of the clear mind returning to the heaving world of physicality, both within itself and the outside world.<sup>43</sup> It is about the correct ordering of relationships and dynamics in the self and the different levels that can be attained within.

### **Disintegration of the Soul**

It is with this point clearly in mind that we move to Plato's discussion of different types of political constitutions and their ordering in a hierarchy that begins with the Ideal Republic and then slowly disintegrates on a path downwards towards Tyranny through the states of Timocracy, Oligarchy and Democracy (*Rep.* 543 a – 576 b). Plato has just

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<sup>43</sup> The difficulty with such a great text as the *Republic* is its working with so many factors. It explores the relationship of one to many, and the relationship of inside to outside, but in the last instance, it uses a metaphor of the many to illuminate the one, and the metaphor of the outside to illuminate the inside. So the final pedagogic message is directly addressed to the individual with a vision of how to correctly organize and train the interior so that happiness can be reached. This does not mean that Plato did not have ambitions as a politician, nor that much of the *Republic* is not a carefully worked program of political reform with astounding insights and dangers, only that the initial pedagogic focus on the interior of the individual must not be forgotten or eclipsed. It is a holistic vision that holds together both the inside and the outside, the one and the many in an intricate whole, its danger lies in the using of processes that hold for the individual interior on society and nature. We will see this dangerous assumption fall apart from the thirteenth century onwards as both nature and society emerge with their own strong claims for independent logics from that of the individual. The advantage of this is that the individual also comes more clearly into focus because of this, allowing for what Foucault rather dramatically calls the invention of Man. At this point I must acknowledge my indebtedness to the work of Ken Wilber, especially his magnum opus *Sex, ecology, spirituality* (1995). He provided me with an initial map to begin the journey we are taking and his principles have helped structure the way I think and Am.

taken us on the journey of the learning soul upwards towards the most ideal state it can reach, now it is incumbent on him to also show just how difficult such a state is and how easily it can spiral downwards into chaos. It is a depressing logic unveiled, a logic of disintegration that reveals to both learner and teacher just how difficult the path upwards is and precisely what the levels of disintegration are. It meticulously tracks the unravelling of perfection. A pedagogy of healing needs a science of pathology, a striving for a just soul must work within an appreciation of its many degenerations – greatness does not touch without destruction. Plato has provided us with an analysis of the levels of learning needed for an individual to reach a just state, now he unpacks for us the paths taken on the road to the most unjust state. It is an inevitable path, given that we live in a world of birth, decay, and death – things fall apart (*Rep.* 546 a). But things fall apart according to a pattern of disintegration that tends to follow, in reverse order, the pattern of transcendence. The rungs of the ladder upwards now collapse downwards. There are in effect three modes of returning to the cave: one to teach and uplift; another to return to parts of oneself that need clarification and integration before continuing upwards again; and lastly a disintegrating tumbling down into chaos. It is the third mode we must carefully unpack, for it is a negativity we carry within as a part of reaching upwards, even as we reach the very highest.

The education of the Intellect, even when it reaches peaks of clarity, is still working within a contingent world. Sometimes it produces insights that do not satisfy the whole being, that favour intellect over the other modalities or make minor misjudgements, allowing for disharmony to enter the system. In the dissonance that follows the appetites, desires and emotions ask for a hearing and are subtly repressed. Although the mind still manages to keep clear and virtuous, it does so in bruised waters and tries to avoid dealing with issues that might disrupt it further. The Intellect cannot hold the equilibrium needed to stay clear sighted in both shadow and light, and tends to withdraw to the light, distancing itself from the everyday turmoil around itself. This world of honour and desire continually shouts for satisfaction, but instead of disciplining or controlling these demands, the Intellect merely ignores them, giving them a world of their own that

actively attempts to achieve satisfaction. It begins to live outside the Cave, in the light, and leaves the desires of the Cave to their own devices. It is the mistake of using contemplation and abstraction as a device to run away from the complex beauty of our world, inside and out.

A thought born into this environment notices the distraction and removal of its originator and wanders about the noisy world so actively being ignored by its father. It is born into middle ground and has to rely strongly on its Competitive Part to protect it from the attacks of Desire clamouring at the gate. It needs a strengthening of will. Birthed in compromise it turns to the Competitive Part for help, and thus partly takes on the ambitious nature so integral to it. Now a thought born into this kind of 'timocratic' environment finds itself pressed between a powerful will bent on achievement/honour, and repressed desires shouting for satisfaction with ever increasing strength. Eventually certain desires will become powerful enough to overcome the Competitive Part and satisfy themselves in heedless abandon, causing major damage to all involved. A thought born after this type of breach tends to fear another loss of will and attempts to channel both Intellect and the Competitive Part into a continual feeding of desire so that major damning does not occur again. Desires are now not ignored or controlled but rationally served. All thought turns towards how to satisfy desire and the will is directed towards finding a continual source of satisfaction. This results in a disciplined and controlled feeding of desire rather than bludgeoning repression combined with Dionysian release. Yet what is being fed is an uneducated monster that demands increasing satisfaction. All that keeps it under control is that the necessary desires fear that the unnecessary desires will mess thing up. In such a state, any attempt of Intellect or the Competitive Part to do something different is squashed in fear that the precarious balance of desires will be disastrously disturbed and the regular feeding destabilized. There is little psychic energy for anything but the continual accumulation of things to guarantee the safe satisfaction of desire. It is an ascetic life lived in delay, storing things up so that nothing can go wrong. To continually satisfy desire is an arduous task, demanding continual control to assure

that the supply is not interrupted. A few 'rich' desires live a life of discipline in the mouth of the Cave, above the many 'poor' unnecessary desires seething below.

A thought borne into this 'Oligarchic' setting finds itself encouraged to serve necessary appetites and ignore unnecessary ones as these threaten the store needed to continually feed the desires. Necessary desires are those needs which have to be met to function properly like making money for food etc, unnecessary desires those which use up money for pleasure alone. But the unnecessary desires are attractive, presenting a smorgasbord of treats crying out to be tasted. An 'internal civil war' ensues (*Rep.* 560 a) in which sometimes the unnecessary desires are routed by the control of necessary desires, but they keep on returning with reinforcements until they finally seize the mind and shatter the remnants of self control left, allowing for an indulgence of all fancies as the learning soul tumbles downwards into the Cave. All resistance crumbles, will is lost, leaving a disordered lunging at all pleasures, a state justified by the term 'freedom'. In this condition all pleasures are allowed, none are deprived of their rights, all are explored equally. No distinction holds anymore between good desires and bad desires, all are allowed communion on the liberal table. A democracy of desires ensues in which the person 'indulges in every passing desire that each day brings' (*Rep.* 561 c). It is a gorgeous life in which an ordered hierarchy that leads to higher satisfactions is abolished and replaced by a radical sameness that is called a celebration of difference. It is a pathology of communion, the rule of the same holds without any recognition of qualitative differences.<sup>44</sup> There is no recognition of depth and height, of the ability of certain ways to hold different levels inside of them in harmonious fashion. All, whether shallow or deep, are given equal recognition in the democracy of shadows.

A thought generated in this 'Democratic' setting is sensitive to the slightest hint of control, and flouts all laws that attempt to keep order. But in the clamour for satisfaction

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<sup>44</sup> This is Wilber's term for democracy gone wild and indiscriminately recognizing everything as valid. See *Sex, ecology, spirituality* (1995) chapter 2.

within the cave of the stomach certain desires emerge that claim to be able to satisfy all the urges and provide all the answers to the chaos emerging. Eventually *one* desire gains enough strength with specious argument and uses brute force to gain complete control. Initial satisfaction is immediately followed by the need to protect against other claimants to the throne, and a violent purging occurs in which any other thoughts of possible value are destroyed in the attempt of one desire to hold complete power. It develops its own complex against all others. It uses whatever means possible to sustain its strength, taking on fawning companions who whisper flattering lies to protect its flanks while it raids all stores of energy and pulls it into itself. If the other desires protest that their freedom is being impinged it is too late, for now the champion of desires has become the tyrant, and along with his sycophants rules over all in a drunken, lust filled, frenzy. All that is left is a master-slave relationship in a fear soaked, anxiety riven, state. We have descended into the final pathology, the selfish pathology of naked self-interest that results from the disintegration of the democratic communion of all with all – Tyranny. The learning soul, pinned and wriggling in the stocks of unnecessary desire, pours all its energy into chasing the shadows that come and go.

### **Ending**

We have now come full circle, a complete account has been given of the pedagogy necessary to lift the learning soul towards The Good as well as the pathological effects of disintegration attendant to such an endeavour in the world of becoming. There is a logic of entropy that runs down into the heat of tyranny and a logic of improvement that ascends to the heights of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. There is a devolution of the world that runs from perfection to tyranny and an evolution that builds from the shadows back to the light. There is a pouring out of The Good into the world and a return of this world to its informing principle. The tuning fork that controls the direction up or down is education. An education incorrectly given quickly spreads its effects, leading to a cycle of degeneration that results in an undisciplined individual chained to ephemeral lusts, eyes riveted only on shadows. An education correctly employed can result in a clear minded, disciplined individual contemplating The Good and living a worthwhile life

while working and teaching in the Cave of becoming. Between these extremes live a whole range of types, ranged according to the manner in which they have managed to order (or disorder) the parts of themselves and so gain access to a certain level of reality, insight and happiness.<sup>45</sup> It is a pedagogy that reveals how to become Divine but understands the various levels below this as well as the difficulty of the task. Plato holds all within his gaze. His educational vision runs from the depths to the heights within an integral framework that encompasses social, political, cultural and physical dimensions of education. He reveals to us the *depths of height* as well as the *dimensions* it exists within. But in the last analysis, happiness is a *state* inside of you, a state that comes from the correct education of the Soul. Whether one takes the path of knowledge or love, mind or

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<sup>45</sup> The key point is that as one ascends the ladder of knowledge and beauty, the higher level includes the lower level and places it within a deeper setting that accounts for more. The ladder keeps on including more within its levels as it ascends, making it more of an inverse pyramid that eventually expands to include all within the simplest of Forms. This is a complex point that will be developed as the chapters progress but its actual insight is a simple one – the more abstract one becomes, the more one includes within the range of statement, until one gets to a foundational abstraction that includes all – much like what is now being pursued by those who dream of a formula to capture the workings of the universe. The key difference is that Plato, Augustine and others are interested in finding the founding principle of matter, life, and intelligence, not just matter. In doing so they recognise that although matter is massive and all around us, only certain forms of matter contain life, e.g. animals, and only certain life forms contain intelligence, e.g. humans. This makes us a deeper and higher form of life as we include matter and life within us in an intelligent form. The more we include within ourselves by self transcendence, the higher the levels we reach and the deeper our existence becomes. This does not mean that we get fatter. It means that our depth increases. A good example of this principle in operation in Plato is in his second proof of a philosopher's happiness being superior to that of a money minded or ambitious person. Each would claim that his own happiness is superior to the others, but only the philosopher would have experience of all three types of happiness as he has included and transcended the pleasures of the first two within himself and reached a higher level of unity that has a discourse (reason) that works between all three types (*Rep.* 580 d – 583 a). By contemplating the heights reached by just one philosopher, more is understood than by contemplating all the matter of the universe. For the philosopher contains within himself the materiality of the universe, the life of cells, the desires and honours of man, and the intellect to hold all of this together in a harmonious whole. He reveals, in one sparkling form, the full depth of existence. That is why the *Republic* is so deep and why I take it to be one of the first and best exemplars of what integral research is.

sentiment, the levels remain still in their austere beauty. How a learner experiences these levels depends on the mode he is using to access the level. The goal of education within this massive vision is always the same however, to become 'like the divine' (*Theaet.* 176 b) by living in the heights of the Soul. Infinity moves, concealed inside us, we have to learn how to turn towards It. Yes

## Chapter Four: Philo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Why Philo? A massive time period sits between Plato and Philo, with the whole defeat of Greece and rise of Rome contained within it. Aristotle, the Neo Aristotelians, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Neo Pythagoreans, the Gnostics, the Hermetics, and various other groups that worked with the education of the human being all come in between these two figures. See Merlan's *From Plato to Neo-Platonism* (1975) as well as many excellent papers in Barnes' *The Cambridge history of later Greek and early Medieval Philosophy* (1995) and Armstrong's *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (1986) for good overviews. What made me choose Philo after Plato? Why not someone like Cicero and his *Dream of Scipio*, or Lucretius' great poem *On the nature of things*, or Catullus' more earthy poems to Lesbia. Apart from Philo's work fitting precisely within the criteria of being an educational narrative that instructs the reader through the depths and the heights within the western tradition, the simple answer lies in the key development Philo introduced specifically into the Platonic tradition. He 'was more than just another platonizer; he was the first figure in western history to wed the Greek contemplative ideal to the monotheistic faith of the Bible' McGinn (1991) 35. It is in his work that we see the great narratives of the Hebrew Testament read in a Platonic manner – Jew and Greek meet in his writing. At the same time that Jesus Christ was breaking open the Jewish tradition to all people with his Life, Philo was writing about an educational journey of the learning soul that combined the wisdom of monotheism and philosophy into one coherent whole. It meant that he was ignored within his own tradition that developed on its own complex path. See Green's *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible to the Middle Ages* (1987) for a superb synopsis. He was destined to become influential with another group just giving birth to itself at the time – the Christians. This was mainly due to his thinking on the *Logos* as the go-between God and Soul. He also offered key solutions to problematics within Middle Platonism but that need not deter us here. See Berchman's *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in transition* (1985) for a good discussion. The key point is that his thinking the *Logos* provided a coherent account of how the soul could return to God on an educational path that involved the clearest part of the intellect (*nous*) using the *Logos* to contemplate God. As John was later to famously say – 'In the beginning was the Word...'

Philo lived in Alexandria during a pivotal time in western history around the beginning of the Common Era (approximately 30 BCE – 40 CE). Jesus of Nazareth, his contemporary, was teaching during the twenties (when Philo was about forty years old) and Philo's writing was to play a vital role in the development of Christian thought and mysticism (see Runia's *Philo of Alexandria and the church fathers* [1995] chapters 1–8). Yet his main concern was to provide a sustained attempt at integrating the Hellenic heritage with Jewish scripture and as such he symbolizes the great meeting point of two profound cultures. In an unrelenting allegorical reading of the writings of Moses he endeavoured to show that this great Jewish leader had both anticipated and gone beyond the Hellenic (mainly Platonic) corpus. In doing this he made Plato more Jewish and Moses more Greek than both had been before. Since then some have felt he made

## Opening

And Philo saw with a radical clarity the insufficiency of an education that ended once reason had been trained to shoot straight. It was not enough to master the great poets and historians, to be able to calculate and reason, to be familiar with how the world and the heavens work, to have swiftness of thought, clarity of speech, and sharpness of argument, to be fit, healthy and harmoniously integrated into family, state and world. This was only a preparation for a greater education into a richer universe; it was only a beginning that laid the way for an education into truth, beauty and goodness; only a sensory concubine before one entered into marriage with Wisdom. Philo used many allegories, metaphors, meditations and philological expositions to expand on this insight,<sup>2</sup> ranging from water

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both more profound, others that he broke them apart in a messy amalgam. His crucial place in the history of western thought remains however, because no matter how we quibble over these intellectual matters, Philo's work has been avidly read and used, if not initially by the Jews, then certainly by the great thinkers of western Christianity. More importantly for us, he provides a detailed pedagogic working through of depths and heights within a register very different to that of Plato, but one that still follows him fairly closely. So we turn to the founding story of the Hebraic tradition and read it with a platonic key.

<sup>2</sup> Around fifty of Philo's treatises survive. They are abbreviated from the Greek, so here are the Greek titles, the English translations, and the abbreviations of the texts I have used in this chapter. I have arranged them alphabetically in two sets – the allegories and his exposition of Moses' law.

### A. The Allegories

<i>De Agricultura</i> (On Husbandry)	<i>Agr.</i>
<i>De Cherubim</i> (On the Cherubim)	<i>Cher.</i>
<i>De Confusione Linguarum</i> (On the Confusion of Tongues)	<i>Conf.</i>
<i>De Congressu Eritudionis Gratia</i> (On the Preliminary Studies)	<i>Congr.</i>
<i>Quod Deterius Potiori Insidiari Soleat</i> (The Worse Attacks the Better)	<i>Det.</i>
<i>Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis</i> (On the Unchangeableness of God)	<i>Deus.</i>
<i>De Ebrietate</i> (On Drunkenness)	<i>Ebr.</i>
<i>De Fuga Et Inventione</i> (On Flight and Finding)	<i>Fug.</i>
<i>De Gigantibus</i> (On the Giants)	<i>Gig.</i>
<i>Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit</i> (Who is the Heir)	<i>Her.</i>
<i>Legum Allegoriae</i> (Allegorical Interpretation)	<i>Leg. 1–3</i>

pitchers, houses,<sup>3</sup> cities,<sup>4</sup> plants and planting (*Agr.* 17–18), wives and concubines, flight and finding, sober drunkenness,<sup>5</sup> turtle doves and pigeons (*Her.* 231–234), patriarchs,<sup>6</sup>

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<i>De Migratione Abrahami</i> (On the Migration of Abraham)	<i>Migr.</i>
<i>De Mutatione Nominum</i> (On the Change of Names)	<i>Mut.</i>
<i>De Plantatione</i> (On Noah's Work as a Planter)	<i>Plant.</i>
<i>De Posteritate Caini</i> (On the Posterity and Exile of Cain)	<i>Post.</i>
<i>De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini</i> (On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain)	<i>Sacr.</i>
<i>De Sobrietate</i> (On Sobriety)	<i>Sobr.</i>
<i>De Somniis</i> I, II (On Dreams)	<i>Somn.</i> 1–2
<b>B. The Expositions</b>	
<i>De Abrahamo</i> (On Abraham)	<i>Abr.</i>
<i>De Decalogo</i> (On the Decalogue)	<i>Decal.</i>
<i>De Vita Moses</i> I, II (On the Life of Moses)	<i>Mos.</i> 1–2
<i>De Opificio Mundi</i> (On the Creation)	<i>Opif.</i>
<i>De Praemiis et Poenis</i> (On Rewards and Punishments)	<i>Praem.</i>
<i>De Specialibus Legibus</i> I, II, III, IV (On the Special Laws)	<i>Spec.</i> 1–4
<i>De Virtutibus</i> (On the Virtues)	<i>Virt.</i>

<sup>3</sup> The soul is the expanse that is open to God's invisible entrance, so we must make it a house fit for God. Philo extends the metaphor in *On the Cherubim* 101–109. The foundations are laid in natural excellence and good teaching, on which are laid virtues and noble actions. The beautiful ornaments are the benefits of school learning. Once such a house is built it is prepared and waits for the descent of the divine potencies who will leave the gift of a purified mind living in pure joy. A prepared soul is one that recognises the radical Impermanence of the self and existence. As Philo puts it in a striking meditation – 'I seem to have mind, reason, sense, yet I find that none of them is really mine. Where was my body before birth, and whither will it go when I have departed? What has become of the changes produced by life's various stages in the seemingly permanent self? Where is the babe that once I was, the boy and the other gradations between boy and full-grown man? Whence came the soul, whither will it go, how long will it be our mate and comrade?' (*Cher.* 114).

<sup>4</sup> There are six cities of refuge that the learning soul can flee towards after receiving preliminary training: the chief city of the Divine Word; the Creative Power city that produces the universe by a Word; the Royal Power city that governs what is created; the Gracious Power city that takes compassion and pity on the created world; the Legislative Power city that prescribes duties on us; and the Prohibitive Power city that

name changes, and giants,<sup>7</sup> to mention a few. One way of holding this cornucopia of imagery together is through an allegorical reading of the life of Abraham. It is a journey

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states what should not be done. For the swift and naturally talented soul, the last five cities are quickly passed through, he does not even stop to draw his breath until reaching the supreme city of the Divine Word. One less swift footed is directed to the city of 'God', to the creative power of the Divine Word. One even less ready is bound for the city of the 'Lord', where he can be corrected by fear for the sovereign ruler of the universe. All three of the above cities are transcendent places of divine presence, presented in descending order. If the learning soul finds it difficult to take this leap across the divide of the heavenly and the earthly, he can still rest in the cities of gracious forgiveness, duties to God, and averting offences. In this hierarchy we see the preparedness of Philo to accept that not all learning souls want to reach the final destination of the 'Alone' (*Fug.* 95–101). They can successfully and happily exist in the worldly cities but still come close to God through obeying his laws, doing their duties and asking for forgiveness. This is who the law of Moses is practically written for. But just because most people opt to stay in these cities, does not mean that the learning path stops at that point. There are three divine cities to be reached that are difficult to travel towards. The learning soul can reach them if it is keen and properly guided – something Philo is attempting to facilitate.

<sup>5</sup> 'Now when grace fills the soul, that soul thereby rejoices and smiles and dances, for it is possessed and inspired, so that to many of the unenlightened it may seem to be drunken, crazy and beside itself' (*Ebr.* 146).

<sup>6</sup> Philo divides the learning soul's development into two sets of three. The first three – Enos, Enoch and Noah – represent the first three stages on the path of the learning soul to God. Firstly there must be hope that the path is transgressable, just as Enos 'hoped to call on the name of the Lord God' (*Abr.* 7). Secondly there must be a repentance of sins and improvement of virtue, represented by Enoch (whose name in Greek means 'recipient of grace') who moves from ignorance to instruction, folly to sense, cowardice to courage, impiety to piety, voluptuousness to self control and vainglory to simplicity (*Abr.* 24–25). Thirdly, we have Noah who loves virtue and is beloved of God. He is just, calm, serene and tranquil, having gained control of his senses and speech. Noah is 'good for his generation' and foreshadows the three great patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are excellent without comparison to their contemporaries and who the main text discusses in more detail.

<sup>7</sup> In *On the Giants* Philo makes a three fold distinction between the Giants who are earth born and pleasure the body; the Heaven born who love learning and contemplate what is intelligible to the mind; and the God born who rise wholly above sense perception and have been translated into the world of the intelligible,

that takes us to different lands, involves symbolic name changes, terrible sacrifice and lots of sex and laughter. This chapter reconstructs parts of this ‘Grand Tour’ with the specific intention of showing the radical incompleteness for Philo of an education that does not have as its ultimate goal the finding of Wisdom and Virtue.

### **The Barrenness of Sarai**

We begin half way through the journey in a curious place – the tale of a wife who cannot fall pregnant and offers her husband the chance of sleeping with, and then marrying, her handmaiden so that an heir can be produced. When finding out that her servant is pregnant, she feels wronged, asks for the handmaiden back and then proceeds to torment her. The story is found in Genesis 16,1–6, and because it is vital to the chapter I will quote it here, rather than in the footnotes, as Philo read it in the Greek translation of the Septuagint.

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, was not bearing to him, and she had a handmaiden, an Egyptian, named Hagar.

And Sarai said to Abram: ‘Behold the Lord hath shut me out from bearing. Go in therefore unto my handmaiden that I may have children from her.’ And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

And Sarai, the wife of Abram, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her handmaid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived, and she saw that she was with child and her mistress was dishonoured before her.

And Sarai said to Abram, ‘I am wronged at thy hands. I have given my handmaiden to thy bosom. But seeing that she was with child, I was dishonoured before her. The Lord judge between thee and me.’

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living as freemen of the commonwealth of Ideas (*Gig.* 60). We will see Origen make a similar distinction between union with body, spirit, and God in the next chapter.

And Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold thy handmaiden is in thy hands. Do with her as is pleasing to thee.' And Sarai afflicted her.

Philo does not want us to suppose that we have here 'one of the usual accompaniments of women's jealousy' (*Congr.* 180). He would prefer an allegorical reading in which Abram represents the soul that wants to learn; Sarai, wisdom in the individual; and Hagar, the preliminary studies that need to be entered before true Wisdom can be reached. It is an intriguing reading, for not only are the higher levels of wisdom represented as barren in the biblical passage, but as fractious. Philo gets over the first hurdle by pointing to the fact that Sarai becomes the mother of the most populous of nations by giving birth to Isaac later on (*Genesis* xxi), and so she is both barren and fertile. This provides him with the warrant to argue that barren means free from evil, and fertile refers to the production of virtue. Sarai becomes a symbol for wisdom in a person, a wisdom that has the possibility of finally reaching the source of Wisdom in its pure Form. As such she is fertile – ceaselessly creative, producing from moment to moment, without interval, the offspring of 'honest words, innocent purposes and laudable acts' (*Congr.* 4). If 'wisdom in me' has the possibility of so much creativity, why, we may ask, is she represented as barren to Abram, as not able to produce many and varied results in the 'soul that wants to learn'? Why do we not see in learners the virtues of wisdom, given her fecundity? For Philo the answer lies in the unreadiness of the learning soul to share her life and thus having to go through preliminary studies before reaching full consummation with wisdom. It is here that Philo applies the tale of Hagar and Sarai to his own experience of learning, when as a youth he says:

I could not receive her offspring, wisdom, justice, piety, because of the multitude of bastard children whom vain imaginations had borne to me. The nurture of these, the constant supervision, the ceaseless anxiety, compelled me to take little thought of the genuine, the truly free borne (*Congr.* 6).

So it is not that Sarai is barren, she is creating continuously in a virginal state as Sarah,<sup>8</sup> only that she cannot bear for a soul that is not prepared for her. She is a mother, but not yet a mother for Abram. Only once the learning soul goes through Hagar can he reach Sarah and the true Wisdom and Virtue she offers. The handmaiden of school education must be mated with before the learning soul can receive the impregnation of Virtue and in this exotic allegory we begin to see a remarkable account of the path a learning soul must travel to reach Wisdom and Virtue.<sup>9</sup>

### **The fruitfulness of Hagar and the beginnings of Philosophy**

The crux is that primary learning at school has great value but must not be mistaken for the true end point. A concubine is not a wife, and the pleasure of learning the various disciplines offered is no replacement for the impregnation of Virtue and Wisdom. It is a beginning to learning, not an end. Once the great areas of history and poetry, geometry and astronomy, rhetoric and music have been mastered, the learner must not imagine learning entire and consummation complete. All has been but preparation for a greater beauty and a more difficult study that will result in a fuller enrichment of the learning soul. What precisely that is we will leave until the details of the path to be travelled have been mapped out.

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<sup>8</sup> As we will see later on, Sarai's name changes to Sarah and this symbolizes, for Philo, the shift from specific and particular virtues in an individual to the Form and Idea of Virtue that is generic to all particular cases. Sarai becomes a virgin again and is able to bear pure thoughts as Sarah. See *Cher.* 3–10, *Congr.* 1–13, *Mut.* 61, 66, 77–80, 130.

<sup>9</sup> There is no dismissal of the Seven Liberal Arts by Philo, or Origen or Augustine. Indeed the techniques used to teach the path towards Wisdom both begins with these arts and picks up on its techniques. A brilliant example of this can be found in Capella's *De nuptiis*. It is a detailed collection of popular late Roman educational texts in each of the seven liberal arts (Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Harmony). One of the pedagogical techniques it used was to set the encyclopaedia within a humorous allegorical tale of courtship and marriage among the pagan Gods that guided the student imaginatively through its pages. See *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts* (1977) edited by Stahl, Johnson and Burge for a superb translation and commentary. Its style fits perfectly within the ambit of this thesis, only it doesn't travel far enough.

What did primary education consist of in Alexandria around the beginning of the Common Era? What 'culture' was gained by the primary learning of the school course? It served as a beginning for Philo, a foreword. 'Great themes need great introductions; and the greatest of all themes is virtue, for it deals with the greatest of materials, that is the whole life of man' (*Congr.* 11). So it is that the great subjects of Grammar, Geometry, Astronomy, Rhetoric, Music and all other intellectual studies serve as an introduction to this noteworthy subject. Nor does Wisdom resent our initial intoxication with their many beauties, but takes on the responsibility for not generating the virtues, pretending that it is her own fault, not blaming the learner's unreadiness for her barrenness. Even though Sarai can bear many children as Sarah she takes on the blame for barrenness, although it is actually the learning soul's fault. She cannot bear *for Abram*. So Sarah judiciously sends the learner to have children first with the lower realms of education. Through Grammar he will 'bear' intelligence and humility when reading how great heroes fall; through Music produce concord rather than discord; in Geometry learn equality, proportion and logical continuity; via Rhetoric sharpen his mind, observe facts, express accurately; and through Dialectic learn how to distinguish true argument from false and see into his own, and others, deceitfulness. All of these benefits prepare the learning mind for its most important journey – the journey to Wisdom.

The status of these lower forms of education is that of a sojourner (which is the meaning of Hagar's name). It is in contact with the sacred and the profane, the citizen and the foreigner. It is immersed in the world of the senses (represented by Egypt) but open to the insights of philosophy, occurring on the borderline between the two. As a sojourner it must not be mistaken for something to rest in, for its point is to take the learner to a certain height, and then to be abandoned for the lasting citizenship of virtue. The beauty of poetry, the insights of the historians, the accuracy of the geometers, the harmonization of the musicians, the excited argument of the sophists, must all be gratefully used and then put to one side, for non of them are true citizens like Virtue and Wisdom. Yet if all

the preliminary studies do is prepare us for the path to Wisdom and Virtue, then where does the real migration begin? Philo's answer is in Philosophy:

Just as the school subjects contribute to the acquirement of philosophy, so does philosophy to the getting of wisdom. For philosophy is the practice or study of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human and their causes. Philosophy teaches us to control the belly and the parts below it, and control of the tongue. Such powers of control are said to be desirable in themselves, but grander...if practiced in honour of God (*Congr. 80*).

Philosophy is superior to the preliminary studies for at least three reasons: it leads to more certain kinds of knowledge (*Congr. 140–145*); it defines the terms and concepts taken for granted by the encyclical (*Congr. 146–150*); and it results in self-knowledge through self examination (*Congr. 80*). The first argument points to the pragmatic nature of the preliminary studies, where whatever is useful to reach a specific end is used, even when the consequences and implications of such use are not thought through rigorously. Philosophy, on the other hand, develops a sure apprehension of the object by testing and cleaning in the fire of argument and precise observation. Philo points to an analogy between the soul and knowledge where just as the soul is the sense of the senses, so is philosophical knowledge the art of the arts. Philosophy is what stands behind the preliminary studies and gives it coherence and depth, allowing for reflection and critique, providing it with its unseen backbone, just as the soul really sees and hears behind the eyes and ears. This leads us on to the second reason behind the superiority of philosophy – it provides the definitions that are taken for granted by the lower disciplines. The wonderful world of isosceles and scalene triangles has fixed properties that geometers work with, but when they are asked about the definition of a point as that which has no parts, they can only repeat the definition, not reason why it is such. Philosophy looks at the assumptions behind assumptions, and therefore takes the learner into deeper waters. But these revealed subterranean depths within education must be pushed further, for philosophy also requires of the student a self examination just as acute, a scrutiny of self

that gets behind the surface workings of the senses, and leads him on to the witness behind the senses – the clear mind. It is only after the learner has followed the Socratic injunction to ‘know thyself’ that the soul<sup>10</sup> is ready to receive Wisdom. It receives in the womb the gift of Wisdom, accepting it from above, not deigning to imagine that it has fallen pregnant of its own doing. All the learning soul can do is prepare and wait in humility for the impregnation of Virtue after it has searched itself and found itself wanting (*Congr.* 130).

We begin to see the mapping of a path that leads from primary education, through philosophy and reason, into Wisdom and Virtue. Philo also mentions the stages of learning before this and uses the statement that Abram spent ten years in Canaan before impregnating Hagar to illustrate this. Canaan is the area Moses led his people into after leaving Egypt. Egypt symbolizes our initial state as children, Canaan our adolescence. As children we do not yet distinguish right from wrong and are immersed in the senses with its pleasures and pains. Only when reason advances enough to comprehend the difference between good and evil, does vice become possible, and this happens in the adolescent years. At this stage we begin to know what right and wrong is but tend towards vice as our natures are still steeped in the passions and reason is but a fledgling. Yet the peculiar strength of Philo’s educational path is not only its careful characterization of five stages (childhood of the passions, adolescence of vice, preparatory learning of the encyclical, reflection of philosophy, and the receiving of Wisdom and Virtue),<sup>11</sup> but also the elaboration of different possible paths to the final goal depending on the *type* of person one is. Just as Plato sketched out paths of love and knowledge towards the divine, so does

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<sup>10</sup> The difference between the soul and clear mind is slight, revolving around the clear mind being a large part of the soul, which also includes rational emotions as a part of its functioning.

<sup>11</sup> In *Who is the Heir* 293–300 Philo gives a fourfold characterization of the stages of the soul, rather than five. His stages often depend on what particular scripture he is allegorising, in this instance *Genesis* 15, 16 refers to *four* generations, and so Philo combines the philosophy of Chaldea (pantheistic Stoics) with that of Haran (Socratic self-knowledge) to reduce the number.

Philo work towards a pedagogy that takes into account different modes of learning. He reveals this in an exquisite meditation on the names of the concubines and wives of Isaac and Jacob (*Congr.* 23–36) as well as Abram.

### **Different types of learning souls**

If Abram is the type of soul that gains Wisdom through instruction, then Jacob is the one who attempts to reach the same prize through actual engagement and practice. He prefers to struggle on the path himself, rather than taking guidance through the words and learning of others. He has the privilege of two concubines and two wives. Leah and Rachel are his wives and their names respectively mean ‘smooth’ and ‘vision of profanation’. Leah represents the smooth movement of the rational mind, Rachel the ‘whetstone’ that sharpens the soul’s ability to deal with the profanity of the world, to despise and cut out the temptations of the senses. A soul attempting to find its own way to virtue desperately needs the guidance of the rational mind and the strength of will to fight the many temptations on the path. The handmaiden of Leah is called Zilpah, meaning ‘walking mouth’ and represents the deceptions offered by clever arguments that can distract the practitioner from smooth and clear reason. She is the danger inherent in the necessary attempt to express and articulate thoughts. Rachel’s handmaiden is named Bilhah, meaning ‘swallowing’, the necessity for eating and drinking that can take us away from virtue if not treated as a servant. The practitioner must continuously desire the Leah movement of smooth and clear reason that leads to noble living and justice in the soul, yet also love Rachel when wrestling the passions and desires of the internal and external worlds. At the same time he must nourish himself physically and express himself verbally, but be continually aware of how physical needs and articulate expression can take him away from the path of Wisdom and Virtue.

Isaac has the simple virtue of only having one wife and no concubine for he represents the gifted soul that learns virtue from itself. It needs neither the concubines of teaching or of practice for he has only constancy for his spouse, which is what Rebecca means according to Philo. It happily receives the gifts from God that are rained down from

above and has no need for the concubines of encycelia and active practicing. We will meet with Isaac later on when elaborating on the nature of Wisdom and Virtue, so let us leave him happily blessed for now.

Through these three great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Philo builds up a typology of souls that travel the path to Wisdom. He does not only reveal one route of ascent, but maps out various trails that can be used, depending on the type of soul gearing up for the trip. There is the studious type of philosopher who loves learning, the active go-getter who wants to get on with it, and the beautiful soul who somehow is already there. At the heart of the Philonic enterprise lies an educational project that recognises different types of souls and attempts to provide guidance of the way to Wisdom and Virtue for all who want to tread this path. He clearly recognises that different types need different paths and uses the patriarchs as symbols to guide them on the way. Yet Philo is not creating one-dimensional characters in his discussion of the three types. These lustrous archetypes are necessary parts to all souls who tread the path towards the divine. There is an element of learning, practice and intuition in all the paths, it is only that one of these elements can dominate and twist the path in a specific direction (*Abr.* 52–54).

The genius of Philo does not end here, however, for he continues the meditation by examining the concubines and wives of worldly learning and the senses in Nahor and Eliphaz (*Congr.* 43–56), taking us back into the shadows. If Abram, Isaac and Jacob represent the path of realization, then Nahor represents those who come close to Wisdom but do not take the final step, and Eliphaz those immersed in the passions and senses. Nahor is the brother of Abram and his name means ‘rest of light’ for although he shares in Abram’s light he does not follow Abram on his most significant journey. For Philo this means that Nahor has reached a point of celebrating the beauty of nature and existence to the point where he even worships it, but has not moved on to a recognition of the Creator behind creation. He stays in the realm of advanced preliminary study at the mouth of the Cave. For his wife he has Micah, meaning queen. She is the queen of the sciences – knowledge of the heavens – and offers the ability to see the created. But she does not

reveal the Creator behind creation, and thus falls short of the final vision, which is of God. Nahor's concubine is named Reumah – seeing something – not God, not the Heavens, just something... words and arguments. She represents the sceptics who concern themselves with petty squabbles, 'who neither wish nor practise to cure their life, brimful of infirmities as it is, but from their earliest years to extreme old age contend in battles of argument' (*Congr.* 53).

Finally we have Eliphaz whose name means 'God has dispersed me' and represents the furthest reaches from God in unreasoning passion. The wife of a bad mind is vice and the concubine is passion, just as Egypt is the childhood of passionate senses and Canaan the adolescence of vice. Timna, the concubine of Eliphaz, means 'tossing faintness' and accurately catches what happens when the soul faints and leaves the bodily passions in command – a surge sweeps down in fury, driven by appetite, and tosses the person around. It is a place of fiction and fable, the rant of tragedy and the silly jokes of comedy, a land of make-believe. It gives birth to passions that consume everything standing in its way, riveting the soul into the shadows. This is confirmed by Timna giving birth to Amalek, a name meaning 'people licking up' just as the flames of desire lick up and obliterate any goodness on the cave wall.

Philo presents the reader with a typology of souls<sup>12</sup> that extends in depth and breadth. He uses the wives and concubines of Genesis to discuss the mechanisms of development from *unruly passions*, into the *control of reason*, and then finally over into *Wisdom and Virtue* that follows a similar trajectory to the Cave Metaphor. Furthermore he reveals that the journey from the earthly to the divine is a complex one that can take many paths

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<sup>12</sup> One of the images Philo uses to illustrate what happens to different souls is that of souls descending into the body as though into a stream and who have sometimes 'been caught in the swirl of its rushing torrent and swallowed up thereby, at other times have been able to stem the current, have risen to the surface and then soared upwards back to the place from whence they came. These last, then, are the souls of those who have given themselves to genuine philosophy, who from first to last study to die to the life in the body, that a higher existence immortal and incorporeal...may be their portion (*Gig.* 13–14).

depending on the type of person one is. Yet the main focus of our analysis lies with Abram, for he is, after all, the type who progresses through learning, so let us return to the tale of his development.

Abram 'hearkened to the voice of Sarai' (Genesis 16, 2). Philo points out how in this verse Abram focuses on the voice of Sarai, not Sarai herself, as a more practically oriented Jacob type might. Abram is a learner who through attention to detail, careful memorization and proper action listens to the voice of his true teacher – Wisdom. He does not lose himself in the arms of a handmaiden and forget his true wife. When Wisdom demands that he give up his studies in poetry and history, geometry and astrology, rhetoric and dialectic, he does not hesitate to turn them over to the disciplining of Wisdom. It is here that the allegorical reading of Philo takes on a nuanced elegance. The seeming pettiness of Sarai afflicting Hagar because of a pregnancy that she encouraged, suddenly becomes Wisdom purifying the preliminary studies so that the learning soul can reach its next stage of development. The disciplining of the passions and the leaving of the pleasures of encyclical studies is a difficult task, bitter and hard to swallow. The learning soul struggles to let go, but just as Abram gave over Hagar to Sarai to be admonished and chastised, so too must the learning soul give itself over to the purification of Wisdom once it has borne fruit in the studies of the world. It must prepare to leave the cave.

### **The Migration of Abram**

To elaborate on the journey the learning soul takes, we can follow the trail of Abram from Chaldea, through Haran, and into the Wilderness based on Genesis 12, 1–4 and 6. God commands Abram to depart from country, kindred and father's house. Allegorically it symbolizes the migration of a virtue loving soul in search of God.

### **Chaldea**

We begin in Chaldea, a place of preliminary study where God is thought to be the world and the world a sensible god. Visible existence is glorified and celebrated for its beauty

and proportion. Interdependence of the heavens and earth is studied through Astrology. The course of events in the world is ascribed to the influence of numbers and various numerical orders and harmonies pervade existence. Philo puts this most sympathetically in *The Migration of Abraham* where he characterizes Chaldea as a place where

they have exhibited the universe as a perfect concord or symphony produced by a sympathetic affinity between its parts, separated indeed in space, but housemates in kinship. These men imagined that this visible universe was the only thing in existence, either being itself God or containing God in itself as the soul of the whole. And they made Fate and Necessity divine, thus filling human life with much impiety, by teaching that apart from phenomena there is no originating cause of anything whatever, but that the circuits of sun and moon and of other heavenly bodies determine for every being in existence both good things and their opposites (*Migr.* 179).

For Philo it is a place of much beauty and truth, yet also a place of deception and danger.<sup>13</sup> Its vision of a world held together in sympathetic affinity is aesthetic and tasteful, its refusal to see further into the Creator behind such harmony, short sighted and hazardous. Philo had experienced first hand the attractions of Stoic Pantheism, for it was an intimate way of thinking and being in Alexandria at the turn of the Common Era. He had come to realize that neither the universe, nor its soul, was God, for God could contain but could not be contained. He was The Being beyond being. It is towards this recognition that the learning soul must strive and then make a part of itself. To do this, the learning soul must leave this charming world of opinion in its worldly and heavenly

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<sup>13</sup> Philo, using seven of the ten tropes of the sceptic Aenesidemus (Introduction to *On Drunkenness*: 314, footnote a), points to the radical instability of philosophical and cultural claims to know things. He recommends that the only course left in this state of affairs is 'to suspend our judgement' (*Ebr.* 192) on all affairs and sacrifice the real to God. To enable this we must firstly go into, and purify, ourselves.

forms and migrate to the internal world of sense perceptions, a place symbolized by Haran.<sup>14</sup>

### **Haran**

Haran means 'hole' and allegorically refers to the openings of sense perception. The learning soul must set itself the task of gaining insight into the exact nature of sense-perception, of how the senses work in good and bad ways. The labour is to gain control over the senses to the point where the migration to Wisdom and Virtue is not totally hindered by material being, enabling intimations of the Divine to be glimpsed. The senses can stifle the ability of the soul's eye to see spiritual things, and so the learning soul must gain the ability to still the vision of the eyes and sounds of the ear so that they can work in a dark silence that opens to the vision of the soul. This would lead the learning soul into the third part of his journey. Philo puts it as follows:

If in this way you learn to effect a divorce from what is mortal, you will go on to receive an education in your conceptions regarding the Uncreate (*Migr.* 192).

Philo is of the opinion that such an education is truly worthwhile and should be seen as the true wife of the learning soul. Yet it is an ending that is never complete, man can never see the nakedness of God for God is not contained and continually more than any sound, thought or vision. Full growth of the learning soul will never mean a complete

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob also goes to Haran, but he flees to escape the powerful opposites represented by the evil of Esau and the perfect virtue of his parents (Isaac and Rebecca) for which he is not ready. It provides him with a chance to gain self-knowledge and the strength to continue the struggle against the senses and passions. In discussing Jacob's flight, Philo provides profound advice to the practiser who is struggling to bring the passions into a subdued state. 'Adapt and transform yourself in outward appearance and follow for the moment whatever it pleases, and opposing no single suggestion of its, profess to share its likes and dislikes. In this way it will be made quite and friendly. And when it has been softened, you will drop your feigning, and, free now from the expectation of suffering any evil at its hands, you will comfortably return to the care of your own charges (*Migr.* 211). Clearly, Philo had some skills in the arts of meditation.

union with God, but will always be something less because of the infinite nature of God and the material existence of man. Yet this end point should never be forgotten and should always be held up as the beacon,<sup>15</sup> so that the learning soul can find its way to God as best it can. By the mind gradually changing its place through an inward journey, it will arrive at the Father of piety and holiness.

Its first step is to relinquish astrology, which betrayed it into the belief that the universe is the primal God, instead of being the handiwork of the primal God... Next it enters upon the consideration of itself, makes a study of the features of its own abode, those that concern the body and sense-perception, and speech, and comes to know...all that existeth of good and of ill in the halls of [its] homestead. The third stage is when, having opened up the road that leads from self, in hope, thereby to come to discern the Universal Father, so hard to untrace and unriddle, it will crown maybe the accurate self-knowledge it has gained with the knowledge of God himself. It will stay no longer in Haran, the organs of sense, *but withdraw into itself* (my emphasis). For it is impossible that the mind whose course still lies in the sensible rather than the mental should arrive at the contemplation of him that is (*Migr.* 194–195).

The great Socratic quest to 'know thyself' exists for Philo as only the middle part of a journey. This inward search does well to get away from the folly of speculating on what is beyond the clouds before grasping the nearer internal landscape. Why, Philo laments, do learners try and grasp the heights that are above their reach when they can make themselves the object of impartial scrutiny. This is true philosophy, learning to scrutinize ones own being in a disinterested and calm manner (*Somn.* 1, 55–58). It is here that we

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<sup>15</sup> Alexandria was built on, and next to, the island of Pharos that had the distinction of having one of the world's highest lighthouses. Estimates vary from 250 feet to half a kilometre high (Sly [1996] 22). It was dedicated to the 'Saviour Gods', referring either to the Greek protectors of shipping – Dioscuri, Castor, and Pollux or the deified Ptolemy. For Philo it partly symbolized the true light of Mosaic Law (Sly [1996] 2)

enter the terrain of an education that is very different to the speculations of the Encyclica, an education of the self, an inward turning that inspects the nature of being in a way that leads to discipline and knowledge of the self, an education that finally results in despair and a reaching towards the Infinite that was always already inside.

Philo carefully maps out techniques of self-examination. Firstly, become aware of the folly of determining the higher regions of the indeterminate (that which is beyond your reach) when you have not determined your own determination (something that is so close to you). Secondly, begin to find out what the senses are. Third, ask yourself the following questions: 'What is it to see and how do I see? What is it to hear and how do I hear? What is it to smell and taste and feel and how do I do each of these functions habitually?' Fourthly, engage in the task of seeing your own soul and the mind which you think of so proudly. At this level one breaks beyond the comprehensible and enters a realm of direct seeing, for one is using a faculty that is beyond mind and soul, a faculty that cannot be comprehended, for it is what lies behind comprehension occurring, it is the emptiness that makes comprehension possible (*Somn.* 1. 55–57). This process will make the learner realize that there is an element deep inside that goes beyond the lifeless body and the irrational emotions, an element that is immortal, rational, still and clear (*Migr.* 185–186). Then will the learner despair of all that is mortal and begin the search for the immortal Reality that he found reflected in his own deepest essence.<sup>16</sup> Only now is the learner ready for the third part of the journey – a pilgrimage towards knowledge and vision of the Infinite, only now is the learner able to bring 'simple reality' as its sacrifice to God (*Det.* 21).

### **The Wilderness**

Once Abram begins the third journey his name changes to Abraham. The high soaring mind that looked to the heavens and celebrated the beauty of nature, glorying in the

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<sup>16</sup> The learner must strive to acquire an 'unswerving mind' (*Cher.* 18) that can 'stand still' (*Cher.* 19), for in this state one is able to draw near to the power of God.

harmony between the two, now comes to recognise its true nature as a likeness to the Uncreate and so can genuinely begin the journey back towards God.<sup>17</sup> This is a trek into the wilderness, a place beyond cities and attractions, a desert where the learning soul can find the solitude and empty darkness that opens towards the Divine (*Abr.* 85–86). The name ‘Abraham’ signifies that Abram has become a wise man in marriage to Sarah and not Sarai. It is not wisdom within himself (Sarai) he communes with, but the Generic Wisdom that comes from the direct vision of The Good, the Beautiful and the True. Philo tells of this transformation in *De Mutatione Nominum* (On the Change of Names).

Abram means ‘uplifted father’ and this catches the nature of the learning soul still caught up in the entrancements of nature study and astrology – the mind lifting itself to examine the heavens. Abraham means ‘elect father of sound’ (*Mut.* 66). The father of sound is the mind (for speech streams forth from the mind), and the elect mind is the mind of the wise, a mind that has acquired virtue. The name change symbolizes a shift from nature study to ethical philosophy and the disciplining of the senses it brings with it, a shift from knowledge of the world to knowledge of its Maker. For just as self-examination reveals a soul behind the senses, so too does nature reveal a God behind creation, and once Abram goes into himself he is on the path to becoming Abraham and finding the image of God within.

This name change is paralleled by Sarai being changed to Sarah, a shift from ‘my sovereignty’ to ‘sovereign’. The first is only a subordinate of the second, generic category. Sarai refers to wisdom in the individual, Sarah to the archetype of Wisdom that belongs beyond examples to an imperishable form. The wisdom of the encyclicia will perish and mutate as will their owners, but the generic Wisdom of The Good and True and Beautiful will continue forever unchanged (*Mut.* 77–80). To reach a level of personal

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<sup>17</sup> All good and beautiful things come from the fountain of beauty – the Uncreate – who needs and wants nothing, being self-sufficient. Yet because the soul has been made in the image of his Image, we long for a return to our source and the fulfilment and happiness it represents (*Cher.* 86).

sovereignty is an admirable level, for with it comes the particular virtues of prudence, temperance, courage and justice (*Cher.* 5–6). Yet these exist as ‘her’ virtues, and derive from her own self control, and as such are perishable and open to change. It is only when the self gives up its claims to virtue, empties itself, and recognises that virtue is a gift from a higher source gracefully descending, that we have the true marriage of Abraham to Sarah, for it is then that God bestows on them the gift of pregnancy with Isaac.

Isaac’s name never changes, for he is born in pursuit of the divine, and is intuitively good at being Good. To move ahead briefly – once Isaac is born, Sarah has the ability to cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael, who represents the sophistic results of a purely encyclic education. This allows Abraham the space to fully concentrate on his marriage with the Divine. So it is that the tale of a household of three comes to an end. Hagar is banished with her sophistic son while Abram and Sarai, becoming Abraham and Sarah, consummate their new relationship of the pure mind with the forms of Wisdom and Virtue, producing as their offspring Isaac – pure Joy.<sup>18</sup> Later we will see Dante the wayfarer lose his reasonable teacher Virgil on the mount of Purgatory and consummate his relationship with Beatrice in ways similar to those described here.

### **The Laughter of Sarah and the birth of Wisdom**

The birth of Isaac represents a culminating point in the education of the learning soul.<sup>19</sup> There are two crucial elements of this tale that are allegorised: the visitation of three

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob’s name changes to Israel (meaning ‘vision of God’) after he successfully wrestles with an Angel, taken variously to be the passions within himself (*Praem.* 48), the quest for virtue (*Mut.* 14), an exercise to gain spiritual strength (*Som.* 1. 129). Jacob’s hard practicing, listening and vague sight is replaced with a clear, direct, immediate vision of God (*Migr.* 199–201, *Leg.* 2. 15, *Praem.* 27, 33, *Ebr.* 82). Like Abraham, he also gains a direct apprehension of God, but from a more struggle filled, practical path. The scriptures do not consistently call Jacob Israel after the qualitative shift in his soul’s development, symbolizing the tendency of the practiser to backslide occasionally because he insists on ‘going it alone’.

strangers to Abraham's tent after he has left Haran with a promise that Sarah would become pregnant; and the readiness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to God. The first part is told in Genesis 18, 1–15 and goes something like this: In the heat of the day, while sitting at his tent door by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham was visited by the Lord. As Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, three men appeared outside the tent. Abraham immediately ran out to meet them, bowed down in front of them and said 'My Lord, if now I have found favour in your sight, please do not pass your servant by'. He offered them water to wash their feet, bread to eat, then prepared a calf along with curds and milk. The feast was presented to them under a tree and, while Abraham was standing with them during the meal, they asked where his wife Sarah was. 'In the tent,' Abraham replied. 'He' (that is the three strangers as One) then told Abraham that in a year's time Sarah would have a son. Sarah was listening at the tent door and could not help but laugh to herself, for she was very old and 'it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women' (Genesis 18, 11). She could not believe that she would have pleasure, seeing that Abraham was so old as well. The Lord hears this and asks Abraham why Sarah is laughing about the possibility of her bearing a child, pointing out that nothing is too difficult for him. At this point Sarah gets frightened for questioning the Lord and denies laughing. The Lord turns to her and says 'But you did laugh'. Like the previous story of Hagar and Sarai, this one does not seem too promising for an allegory of the final stages of educational development of the learning soul. Indeed we have Sarai firstly having the brazenness to laugh to herself about a promise from the Lord and then the gall to deny doing so in front of him. But as we have seen before, the ingenuity of Philo in reading a transformed Hellenic tradition into Hebrew scripture is not to be underestimated.

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<sup>19</sup> We are telling the story of Abraham, yet another teller of this story was greater than he – Moses. If Abraham represents the lived example of the path of the learning soul to Wisdom and Virtue, then Moses represents the supreme example of how close man can get to God. He is a philosopher king, but also a law giver, high priest and prophet, going beyond the supreme leader of Plato's *Republic*. To elaborate goes beyond the ambit of this chapter, but see *Mos.* 1–2 and *Spec.* 1–4.

The first point to note is the quickness and immediacy of Abraham's recognition of God and his instant action within the recognition. His education has taken effect and he works openly in the new realm. Later we will see the more difficult recognition scenes within Shakespeare's works – more slow, more painful...and more powerful. The second point is that the tale makes curious references to the three visitors as if, at certain times, they were one. Philo describes the visit of God as a noon-tide when He shines around the soul, the light of the mind fills through and through, and shadows are driven from it by the rays which pour all around it. A single object presents to the mind a triple vision, one representing the reality, the other two the shadows reflected from it (*Abr.* 119). The One is the Father of the Universe, He That Is. On either side of him are his senior potencies, the ability to create and the ability to rule. The first potency made and ordered everything that exists, the second rules and controls what has been brought into being. The first is called God, the second Lord. That is why the mind that contemplates He That Is sometimes sees One and sometimes Three. It is only at its most purified that the mind is able to contemplate the One and experience 'the ideal form which is free from mixture and complexity, and being self contained needs nothing more' (*Abr.* 122). The mind tends to see the Existent through its creativity or rulership when uninitiated into the highest mysteries. As such the mind benefits from the contemplation, either through gaining blessings that flow freely from the creativity of God, or forgiveness of sins from the Lord. This leads us into the vexed question of the mysticism of Philo and the level he allowed the learning soul to reach in its quest to see the Uncreate.

The questions that need answering here is why the soul has a quest to reach the Uncreate in the first place, and secondly, how far man can go in this quest. Philo gives varying accounts (*Op.* 65–88, *Conf.* 169–180) but a particularly beautiful rendition that answers both questions is given in *The Worse Attacks the Better* (*Det.* 86–90). Here Philo baldly states that the Creator wrought for the body a soul that could obtain a *conception* of him who created him, but no soul capable by itself of *seeing* the Maker (*Det.* 86). The reason why God allowed the created soul the ability to conceive of God stems from two sources. Firstly, God's kindness, for it is only the contemplation of God that leads to ultimate

happiness and blessedness, and God would not enviously keep these blessings away from man. Secondly, by breathing his own Deity into man, he stamped on the soul an impression of Divinity, thus giving it the urge to return to its source – God. Philo's great allegorical reading of Genesis is directed at attempting to guide and educate this image of an Image back to its original stamping in the Divine. The pure mind is a result of this stamping and takes on characteristics of the Divine as a result. Its outstanding characteristic is an expansive nature, a continual breaking out of boundaries in an ever widening and deepening circle, shifting from the exploration of the earth to the air and the heavens until even the universe is too narrow for its perpetual extension, reaching finally to conceive of its source, God.<sup>20</sup> Only once this goal has been reached will the learning of Abraham have reached its end point, for he will have come full circle and live as the pure image of the breath of God. He will have overcome the forgetting of his Divine image when succumbing to temptation in Eden,<sup>21</sup> expanded beyond the

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<sup>20</sup> At this level, movement becomes something very different to transference in space where a traveller leaves one place and goes to another. Here, there is only a motion of self-extension and self-expansion. To leave one place and go to another, one must have taken the self along as that which did the travelling. Yet when one expands into the infinite, then one always just is where one is, infinitely expanded (*Sacr.* 68). Philo, in recommending that we imitate the perfection of the Teacher, describes a non-dual motion of expansion rather than that of a subject moving itself in an object world from place to place. He catches the subtleness of this non-duality again when describing what happens when God speaks. 'God spake and it was done – no interval between the two – or it might suggest a truer view to say that his word was deed' (*Sacr.* 65).

<sup>21</sup> The tale of the creation of man, his temptation, fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden is used for different ends by Philo, depending on the allegorical point needing to be made, yet there are three Adam's who Philo works with. Adam generically represents the mind of man (without body) made after the image and breath of God (*Leg.* 1. 90, 92, *Cher.* 10, 57). It is pure, clear and immortal with a secluded knowledge of Virtue that is remembered and practiced all the time (*Leg.* 1. 88, 90). Yet Adam is also used to name the mind of the earthly creation of man (*Cher.* 57, *Plant.* 42). This mind cannot remember or practice virtue, only apprehend it. It is a perishable mind that does not know itself, neutral in terms of goodness and badness, incomplete without the senses (*Leg.* 1. 88–95). It is a mind that is tempted by the senses (Eve) and abandons God for the Flesh. Once this happens the neutral mind becomes foolish and bad, assumes that it is

addictiveness of the senses in Egypt, the alluring vice of Canaan, the captivating school studies of Hagar in Chaldea, the phenomenological philosophy of Haran, finally entering the wilderness where he can meet with the Uncreate who is One and Three. Yet this meeting will always only be with the part of God that is turned towards creation (the Potencies and/or the Logos), and never with God in his fullness, for the full experiencing of God would entail becoming him. This is impossible for Philo as we were created at a third remove from God, in the image of his Image, and thus at our highest can only contemplate his Image, never his Uncreateness. Our creation limits us to enjoying communion with the Logos, the breath of God. Even so, this is an extraordinarily joyous event, and it is here that we get back to the tale of the promised birth of Isaac, the result of the whole educational journey, and Sarah laughing to herself about it.

Sarah had ceased to be after the manner of women. Philo reads this to mean that all of the passions of the body had been stilled to the point where she had become virginal again, thus able to become the husband of God and produce the offspring of virtue, which is joy. Sarah laughs with the *anticipatory* joy of virtue she is carrying within her, even if she has not given birth yet. It is a laughter beyond fear and grief, a laughter that is close to God, for God is without grief and fear and wholly exempt from any passion, and thus able to be perfectly happy. It is a joy that God wants all those who are worthy of him to attain, and that is why he asks after Sarah's laughter, for he wants her to acknowledge the joy that is her heritage (*Abr.* 203–204). It is a curious thing, God asking questions when he already knows the answers, and for Philo this means that God is pointing to something that Abraham and Sarah need to recognise. It is that He does not begrudge them joy and rejoicing as a part of, and reward for, the virtuous life. Indeed, he wishes it to be so. It is the virtuous and wise human being who cannot believe that such bounty should be

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responsible for everything and is expelled from Virtue (*Leg.* 3. 200, 216). The journey of Abraham is one that attempts to return to the generic Adam, an Adam that was always inside, but lost and forgotten. The journey is made difficult by the temptations of the senses and the fallen nature of the mind, both of which can be overcome by following the path of being educated by Wisdom. The three natures of Adam – generic, human, and fallen – captures the nature of mind in the world of Forms, the fallen mind captured by the Senses, and the mind that exists between these two worlds – the human, all too human, mind.

allowed something material and created. That is why Sarah denies her laughter, she feared that she was grasping something meant for God alone. In this she was wrong for the holy word bids her:

‘Be not afraid: thou didst laugh and dost participate in joy.’ For the Father did not suffer the whole course of the human race to move amid griefs and pains and burdens which admit no remedy, but mixed with them something of the better nature and judged it well that the soul should at times dwell in sunshine and calm; and as for the soul of the wise He willed that it should pass the chief part of its life in glad hearted contemplation of what the world has to show (*Abr.* 207).

Yet it is precisely this precious, beneficent and rare joy that Abraham has to show a willingness to sacrifice, as shown by his preparedness to sacrifice Isaac at the request of a divine message. Isaac represents the pure happiness that comes with dying to the passions, a bearing of pure thought that is beautiful in its own nature and not because of learning or practice. The thought occurs in a virginal spontaneity, beyond the customs of culture and the reasoning of philosophy. It is a new way of being that is beyond reason, arising not from will or human purpose but by a ‘God-inspired ecstasy’ that has a timeless feel about it (*Fug.* 167–168) where the learning soul can cry out in *ekstasis* – I am without myself. This is the sacrifice that the learning soul must be prepared to make, an offering of its most precious finding and reward, of its first fruits.<sup>22</sup> Such an act is

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<sup>22</sup> Philo advises a fourfold method of offering the first fruits of a virtuous soul to God. Firstly it must be a new thought in a sense of being instantaneous and timeless, not relying on the lore of school lessons and tales of culture, for ‘when, unforeseen and unhopd for, the sudden beam of self-inspired Wisdom has shone upon us, when that Wisdom has opened the closed eye of the soul and made us spectators rather than hearers of knowledge, and substituted in our minds sight, the swiftest of senses, for the slower sense of hearing, then it is idle any longer to exercise the ear with words’ (*Sacr.* 78). Secondly, this fresh ripeness of the soul must be ‘roasted’ by reason so that it can become solid and steadfast and lose any remnants of the self-seeking self and senses. Thirdly, the whole experience must be ‘sliced’ and analysed so that its process and functioning is fully understood. This will result in the exercise of a soul free from encumbrances and

inconceivably difficult, as difficult as a father sacrificing his son to God.<sup>23</sup> It is the total offering of a mind that has reached the summit of its learning and recognises that what it has is not its own but a gift and is prepared to relinquish ownership to God. It is in the ability to sacrifice even the greatest boon of virtue – happiness of pure thought – that the learner comes to the end of his course. He is now a wise man, wedded to the pure forms of Wisdom and Virtue, spontaneously birthing pure thoughts in an easy<sup>24</sup> space of joy and light while continually recognizing its nature as a gift and never taking ownership for its bounties.<sup>25</sup> He is a man who walks with the Logos in the Uncreate, as Origen will later describe the bride and Bridegroom walking in God. Continual birthing in love can only occur on the bed of continual sacrifice – such is the lesson of Isaac.

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able to divide and classify the new from the old and see more clearly the nature of this new world.

Fourthly, to ensure lasting possession of such divine fruits, continual practice and discipline will ‘pound’ and grind the experience into the marrow of the virtuous soul. If such a soul is able to take its new thought, subject it to the roasting of reason, slice it up into the proper categories, and pound it into itself, then it will be able to bring an offering of ‘first fruits’ to God (*Sacr.* 76–87).

<sup>23</sup> Philo points out the difficulty of Abraham’s act by pointing out that it was a new and extraordinary task he was assigned, not one of custom. Isaac was more loved than the celebrated emotional heights of chaste love and friendship. Isaac had been a late child and was irreplaceable, and in language that the Christians found so congenial, Philo continued – ‘one who gives his only darling son performs an action for which no language is adequate’ (*Abr.* 196).

<sup>24</sup> This is how God works, in an activity that is totally at ease and without strain or suffering. He never ‘rests’ in the sense of ‘needs a break’ but is totally restful in the act of creating (*Cher.* 87).

<sup>25</sup> Wisdom leads to the recognition that to claim anything for the self is a dangerous act that leads away from walking with the Divine. Reflections, knowledge, skills, perceptions, all must occur without the self laying claims of ownership. By recognizing that all is God’s possession, this way of being is facilitated. If not, the self that pursues ownership of mind and sense will find itself pursued for ‘maladies and old age and death, with all other host of evils voluntary and involuntary, drive and hustle and pursue each one of us, and he who thinks to overtake and conquer is overtaken and conquered’ (*Cher.* 74–5).

In the allegorical world of husbands and spouses, the wife of Isaac holds a place supreme. We reach the highest point within Philo's lexicon of learning with the purity of Rebecca, especially when compared to the other wives. Hagar represents the preliminary studies and her son, Ishmael<sup>26</sup> the sophistic results, Isaac represents the birth of joy and happiness when the learning soul becomes wise and marries Sarah, the forms of Wisdom and Virtue. Isaac goes on to marry Rebecca, the 'ever-virgin' (*Post.* 134), unlike Sarah who passed from womanhood to virginity. The story Philo used for the allegory on Rebecca as the great teacher of Virtue and Wisdom is found in Genesis 24, 16–20 and I quote his version:

The damsel was very fair to look upon: she was a virgin, no man had known her. And she went down to the spring and filled her pitcher and came up. And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Give me to drink, I pray thee, a little water out of thy pitcher. And she said, Drink sir. And she hastened and let down her pitcher on to her arm, and gave him drink, until he ceased drinking. And she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they all have drunk. And she hastened and emptied her pitcher into the trough and ran to the well and drew water for the camels.

Hagar also finds herself at a well after fleeing Wisdom and Virtue with her sophistic son. She draws water for Ishmael with a water skin, and it is this detail that allows Philo to

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<sup>26</sup> Ishmael is harshly presented as the cantankerous lover of argument who shoots down his opponents with the arrows of argument and is shot back at himself (*Post.* 131 and *Congr.* 129). Yet even the gradual education that he receives from Hagar allows him a place near God, once Abraham asks God to 'let Ishmael live before thee' (Genesis 17, 18). It is a secondary place, one of hearing rather than seeing God, but a fruitful place nevertheless. Again we see the care with which Philo thinks about 'school education'. It may be unable to partake in God's greatest gift (Isaac), but is able to live profitably in its shadow (*Mut.* 201–263). Given this, a well of sympathy exists for Hagar, given her rather shabby treatment, and any deconstructive reading of the Patriarchal tradition could do worse than start with the back-grounding of Hagar. Teubal's *Ancient sisterhood: the lost traditions of Hagar and Sarah* (1990) foregrounds these matriarchal figures, making of them more than mere sleeping partners for Abraham. Philo, of course, does the something similar, but not in so feminist a spirit.

launch into a full scale allegorical comparison of the teaching of Virtue (Rebecca) in comparison to the teaching of the Encycelia (Hagar).

Rebecca represents, for Philo, Virtue at its purest, free from pretence and shadows. She has never been 'known' by man, for her beautiful goodness is the incorruptible form of which mortals can gain but a partial understanding. She goes *down* to the spring, just as the true learner has to descend into the well of his own self knowledge to where life springs forth in its most secret powers, before ascending towards a knowledge of God. Rebecca uses a pitcher in contrast to the animal skin of Hagar, for she is filled with a Wisdom that is free from the senses and the body, and is able to pour out Wisdom without encumbrance. In contrast, Hagar uses an animal skin that pours slowly and fills only gradually, for when the preliminary studies come to the well of Wisdom, it can only learn slowly from the source and then only through the senses, thus losing much of the Wisdom in the process. The learning soul will recognise the difference between drinking from the animal skin of Hagar and the unalloyed pitcher of Rebecca. It will run to Rebecca and plead with her to instruct him and she will, with ungrudging generosity, allow him to immediately drink his fill. Nor does she lay claim to the power to satisfy the learner's thirst, saying not 'I will give you something to drink', but only 'Drink', for all she is doing is making manifest a Divine abundance that is always available to those who are worthy. She hastens to help the learning soul, for she lacks envy and lets down the pitcher on her arm so that she can be on the same level as the learner and be 'intimately concerned' about him. This shows how the wise teacher does not try to display all his knowledge to the learning soul and thus drown him in Wisdom, but attentively attends to the learner and provides just what is needed at the time. In doing this, the wise teacher imitates God, who does not obliterate the learning soul with all his magnificence but presents himself according to the ever-varying capacity of the learning soul to receive him.

In the journey to becoming like the Uncreate, the learning effort of the Abrahamic soul is continually lifted and assisted by the presence of the Divine, who will be with the learner

throughout, and provide him with gifts of encouragement and anticipation. Philo had experienced the grace of these boons and describes movingly how it affected his own work, so I quote in full.

I feel no shame in recording my own experience, a thing I know from its having happened to me a thousand times. On some occasions, after making up my mind to follow the usual course of writing on philosophical tenets, and knowing definitely the substance of what I was to set down, I have found my understanding incapable of giving birth to a single idea, and having given it up without accomplishing anything, reviling my understanding for its self-conceit, and filled with amazement at the might of him that is to Whom is due the opening and closing of the soul-wombs. On other occasions, I have approached my work empty and suddenly become full, the ideas falling in a shower from above and being sown invisibly, so that under the influence of the Divine possession I have been filled with corybantic frenzy and been unconscious of anything, place, persons present, myself, words spoken, lines written. For I obtained language, ideas, an enjoyment of light, keenest vision, pellucid distinctness of objects, such as might be received through the eyes as the result of the clearest shewing (*Migr.* 34–35).<sup>27</sup>

God provides the learning soul who is on the path to becoming wise with anticipatory fore-shadowings. This enables the learning soul to rest in the hope of future goodness

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<sup>27</sup> Winston interrogates this revealing text and others in the best current discussion of Philo's mysticism. See his 'Philo of Alexandria' in Green's *Jewish Spirituality* (1986) for an excellent summary. He points to at least twelve facets of Philonic mysticism: the knowledge of God is supreme bliss and the soul has an intense yearning for the divine; recognition of ones nothingness and a need to go out of oneself (*Somn.* 1. 60); a powerful attachment to God (*Plant.* 64); there is a realization that it is God alone who acts (*Fragments:* 8); contemplative prayer is preferred; a sense of timeless union with the all pervades the soul (*Conf.* 95–97); serenity (*Gig.* 49, *Deus.* 12); suddenness of vision (*Sacr.* 78–9); sober intoxication (*Opif.* 70); ecstatic condition of the soul (*Ebr.* 145; *LA* 1,82); and an ebb and flow of the experience (*Somn.* 2.233).

while seeing some of its glory on the way in contemplation, finding sustenance for the hard road ahead.<sup>28</sup>

### Closing

So we come to the end of the story of the learning soul. It is a long journey that begins with the soul's creation as a likeness of a likeness – born by the breath of God – and the forgetting of this divine heritage through its fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The route it takes is a protracted and difficult one, passing through the vacuous enjoyment of the senses in Egypt to the vice filled adolescence of Canaan. It begins to gain knowledge whilst sojourning in Chaldea and engages in a preliminary learning that reveals the beauty of God's creation without revealing the nature of God behind it. To travel this further path, the learning soul has to abandon the sweet lights of Stoic learning as Philo understands it<sup>29</sup> and migrate to Haran, the land of self knowledge, a place that reveals the

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<sup>28</sup> God provides four other gifts to help the learning soul as well – strengthened and abundant growth of virtue; an ability to combine excellent reason and wordless contemplation with speech; an enjoyment of the fatness of the earth and the purified senses as well as the dew of heaven; and finally the great gift of 'simple being', free of feigning and pretence (*Migr.* 53–106).

<sup>29</sup> Philo's ideas were drenched in Stoic philosophy, often seeming to merely replace The Uncreate for Zeus. Sometimes, when reading his work, one cannot escape the feeling that he has merely retreaded Plato and the Stoics with Jewish nomenclature, and then his own creative genius bursts through. I leave the reader with Cleanthes' famous Hymn to Zeus to ponder just how 'different' Philo was from the Stoics.

Noblest of immortals, many-titles, ever omnipotent Zeus, director of nature, steering all with your law, hail to you. It is right for every mortal to address you: we are your offspring, and of all creatures that live and tread the earth we alone have been given a likeness to god. ...All this world, as it whirls around the earth, obeys you wherever you lead, and willingly submits to your power. Such is the double-edged, fiery, ever-living thunderbolt which you hold at the ready in your unvanquished hands. For under its blow all the works of nature are accomplished. With it you administer the universal reason (*logos*) which passes through everything.... Nothing occurs on the earth apart from you...except what bad men do in their folly. But you know how to make things

true emptiness of existence. Only once the senses and the self have been mastered can the learning soul finally progress into the wilderness where it will receive the vision of God and gain the promise of a birth of true happiness and joy, a joy that comes from the proper exercise of Virtue. If it continues to recognise that this is a gift from God, not a result of own merit, through a continual practice of sacrifice, it will come to live a life of true Beauty, Truth and Goodness, which is as near as a human being can come to the full Being of God. This is the story of the learning soul, of how Abram came to be Abraham and walk in the likeness of God. It is a story of how it is possible to travel through the world of learning, the world of the self and the world of the Eternal in a great circle of learning that brings the soul back to what it originally was – a divine image, a divine breath found in the well inside. It is contained within a massive pedagogics that works not only with depth and height but with the complex varieties and pathologies between, developing a subtle set of typologies, registers and techniques to educate and focus on different archetypes – the struggling Jacob, the gifted Isaac, the hesitant Nahor, the dispersed and scattered Eliphaz. Philo ends the tale of the migration of the learning soul with a plea to himself as a learner still on the path, and it provides a fitting end to this chapter.

Open wide the organ in thyself that sees, and stoop to get a view of the inside, and behold with more accurate gaze the things that *are*, and never either willingly or unwillingly close thine eyes; for sleep is a blind thing, as wakefulness is a thing of keen sight. And it is a sufficient reward to obtain by unremitting inspection a clear impression of the things thou art in search of (*Migr.* 222).

Yes.

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crooked straight and to harmonize what is dissonant. You love what is not loved. For you have so wrought together into one all that is good and bad that they have a single everlasting reason (Long 'Epicureans and Stoics' in Armstrong's *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* [1986] 147).

## Chapter Five: Origen<sup>1</sup>

### Opening

And for Origen<sup>2</sup> the world is a schoolroom. We are fallen intellects who cooled off in our ardour towards God and must now use the educational opportunity presented by our lives

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<sup>1</sup> Why Origen? After exploring the mixing of Jewish and Greek traditions in the work of Philo, the next alternative was to select a story that combined the Christian and Greek traditions within an educational narrative of depth to height. There were many choices within this field: The story of Paul – his persecution of the Christians, his being struck down by God, his ascent to the Third Heaven, his working with faith, knowledge and love as roads towards the Lord; the Johannine texts describing how Union with God through Christ can be partly achieved in this life by following the path of *agape*; the great Gnostic texts such as *Zostrianos*, the *Allogenes*, *The three tablets of Seth* that tell of the soul falling into the depths of materiality before rising back up into the immaterial Source in tales of great Darkness and Light; or the more immanent Gnostic tales found in the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Gospel of Philip* and of *Thomas* that point towards an awakening within of the Divine Spirit. Layton (1987) has excellent translations of this neglected part of our history; Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* in Horner (1901) that tells of his education towards the Light in such a way that includes the Platonic experience but argues that it comes as a result of the Holy Spirit not as something automatically contained in human nature; and Clement of Alexandria's synthesis of Middle Platonism and Christianity in an educational matrix of great power and scope in his rambling *Paedagogus* and *Stromateis*. All of these texts fit into the criteria of this thesis, why then Origen? Firstly, he was the earliest great Christian teacher to systematically use the Biblical text to describe the personal journey of the soul towards God in a manner that combined Platonism and Christianity (McGinn [1992] 112). He turned biblical language into a pedagogy of the soul travelling towards the Divine. Secondly, he provided numerous stories of the journey of the soul towards God, worked out in exceptional detail, allowing a complex and thorough vision of the educational path to be developed. Thirdly, in using the *Song of Songs* as one of his major sources he provided this thesis with a shift in genre from philosophy and travelogue to love song. Fourthly, this education in love referred usefully back to the discourses on love in the *Symposium*, while also building forwards towards Abelard and Saint Bernard's use of the same Song for their accounts of the education of the learning soul. Fifthly, the *Song of Songs* has a rich history of pedagogic use within the Hebrew and Christian traditions. Utilizing Origen's commentary introduced this language into the warp and weft of this thesis. All of these factors made Origen the next obvious choice after Philo.

on earth to Return to the One. In a way starkly different from Plotinus (a younger, fellow student under the great teacher, Saccus) Origen presented the picture of procession from the One into multiplicity and return to its simplicity in a dramatic form. It came alive under his hands: the Abstract One became the God of the Jews and Christians; the Intellectual hypostases consolidated into the eternal Christ who incarnates and sacrifices himself; the Emanation partly became a Fall into sin and was full of Stars, Angels, Humans and Devils; the Return to The Good an active relationship of love towards Christ informed by an inspirational reading of the Word rather than a journey of the alone to the

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<sup>2</sup> We find most of our information about Origen in Eusebius' sixth book of *Ecclesiastical History*. He lived in Alexandria for the first 47 years of his life, from 185–232. When he was 17 a vicious persecution of the Church of Alexandria began and his father, Leonides, was made a martyr and all family property was confiscated. Origen was forced to provide for his mother and six younger brothers. He became a teacher and his fame quickly spread, attracting both pagan and Christian students alike to the catechist school he taught in and then directed. Eusebius draws a picture of Origen's youth as studious, austere, pure, and zealous. His desire to learn was omnivorous and he found in the great teacher, Ammonius Saccas, someone worthy to take him through the depths of Platonic and Stoic wisdom. He also learned Hebrew and was thus able to incorporate Jewish scholarship and rabbinical wisdom into his teaching and commentaries. He travelled extensively to Rome, Arabia, Palestine, Antioch, and Greece to deal with matters of faith and was highly respected wherever he went. His increasing reputation made him unpopular with the bishop of Alexandria and so Origen left this great city for Caesarea (in Palestine) after a decree of banishment and a stripping of his priesthood was passed in controversial circumstances. He founded a new school that quickly grew and resumed his great project of commentary on scripture. Origen was not scared of controversy and his contributions against heresies and the defending of Christianity against pagan philosophy continued into his old age. He was over sixty when he wrote *Contra Celsum* – a famous defence of Christianity against the 'misperceptions' of Middle Platonism. The persecution of Decius (250) prevented Origen from continuing his writing and teaching. He was imprisoned and tortured, and although he desired to die as a martyr, his persecutor, Decius, died a year into the persecution – 251. This meant that Origen escaped the fate of his father but it left him a mortally wounded man. He died in 253 or 254 at the age of sixty–nine as a man whose courage and conviction had been tested by the schoolroom of this world, famous as an exemplar of what a Christian stood for, and a fount of Christian wisdom and controversy ever since.

Alone. All of this was buttressed by a living community of professing believers and a set of rituals that reinforced and stabilized, unlike the Neo-Platonists who struggled to generate a church and tradition. Origen took the learning soul On the Road with its dangerous highways and difficult paths. The cooled human soul had an opening on earth to learn how to walk the narrow path and return to the warmth and happiness she once had known in the arms of her lover and Bridegroom. It is this gathering of the Jewish God and Platonic philosophy in the form of One God-man and his love for us that we have a dramatic synthesis that was to fundamentally structure the education of the learning soul for two millennia in the west and it is in Origen that we find its first full exegesis.<sup>3</sup>

We enter a theatrical world with Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The world becomes a stage for a drama of glorious proportions. I want to partly retain this form as we progress through the chapter,

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<sup>3</sup> Origen wrote volumously, some estimates go as high as six thousand pieces, although this count would include his letters, homilies and different books contained in a single work. The figure seems to be exaggerated, but more important than a number count is the fact that we have lost much of his work and some only exists in translation. This loss is compounded by the possible distortions that transcribers may have put in due to Origen's fluctuating status as a heretic and the possibility of imitation and forgery. A working method adopted by Origenist scholars is to not exclude the translations and fragments but to try and build as rich a picture as possible from all sources. The best introduction to Origen's thought in English is a gem of a collection with a brilliant preface by Balthasar and good introduction by Greer as a part of the *Classics of western spirituality*. The best current commentary on Origen in English that I have read is that of Henri Crouzel's *Origen* (1989), a work that I found useful in writing this chapter, as well as Louth (1981), McGinn (1992), and Greer (1979). Joseph Trigg's *Origen* (1998) contains a number of useful translations and commentaries. A useful placing of Origen in the context of his Greek inheritance and Christian contemporaries can be found in Chadwick's excellent *Early Christian thought and the Classical tradition: studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (1984). In terms of Origen's own work I have mainly used the following: *Commentary on the Song of Songs*; *Dialogue of Origen with Heraclides and his fellow bishops on the Father, the Son, and the soul*; *Contra Celsum*; *Homily XXVII on Numbers*; *On Prayer*; and *On First Principles*.

<sup>4</sup> The dramatic nature of Christianity has been extensively thought through by Balthasar, who, in the first of his great volumes on *The Glory of God* (1982), gives an exhaustive account of how this analogy works.

using its first half to set the scene by providing an exposition on Origen's thought about the education of the learning soul, and the second half to tell the actual story of the learning soul's return to the bosom of Christ through the beautiful love poetry of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>5</sup>

### The Nature of the learning soul

To begin with, let us look into the nature of this learning soul and what its educational development consists of. It is located between two other elements – body and spirit.<sup>6</sup> The *spirit* is what is divine in man, a gift of God that is not a part of the human personality, it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, a result of the outpouring of God. It is found in all of us as our highest and deepest part, untouched by whatever we do, always present, always pure. It keeps the possibility of conversion open, for it is not damaged by sin, retaining its divinity no matter what. It is the still point where the dance is. The spirit is the educator

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Greer, in his introduction to *Origen: An exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayers and Selected Works* (1979), provides an account that is structured around the stage metaphor. I partly pick up on this organizing device, although I use it differently.

<sup>5</sup> Another exemplary example is provided by Origen's *Homily on Numbers*. It traces the route the Jews took in the Exodus, giving spiritual meanings to all the various places journeyed through on the way to the Promised Land. Just as the Jews took forty years, travelling back and forth, finding and losing God, so too does the learning soul experience its wandering journey towards the Divine. Names are given of the various stages of the journey through the desert, so too do the spiritual meanings of these names correlate with the stages of the ascent of the learning soul to God. Finally, after much hardship, she arrives at the river of God and is watered by the waves of divine knowledge, drinks from flowing Wisdom, until she can finally enter the Promised Land. The learning soul finally returns to her source. This flowing stream metaphor is used in conjunction with that of Light, where, as the soul goes upwards through the levels it is 'enlightened stage by stage; it always receives an increase in splendour, illumined at each stage the light of Wisdom, until it arrives at the Father of lights himself' (*Homily XXVII On Numbers*). We will see Dante experience similar increases in illumination as he ascends through Paradise.

<sup>6</sup> In Crouzel (1989) chapter 5 there is a lucid discussion of what he calls the 'trichotomy' of man and I partly use his synthesis in the paragraph that follows.

of that part of the soul closest too it – the *intellect* – teaching it about the nature of Virtue and Wisdom and how to practice both. The intellect (higher soul) was the whole soul before it cooled and fell down (*On First Principles* I, 4). In his first creation, God only created intellects, all on the same level, all able to participate in the Divine with and through the Eternal Word (*On First Principles* I, 5). Only with the falling away from him in free will did he create a second world for us, more suitable to our damaged condition, able to work a chastening and educative presence. In the First World, we were created in the Image of God (Christ) and could thus participate in the lighting of Being, based on the principle of like knows Like. This intellect is what receives the Divine outpouring of God, having divine senses to contemplate this outpouring. As such it was able to enter into union with the First Image of God – Christ – as bride to Bridegroom, both united and unconcealed in the bosom of the Father. Crucially, it has another characteristic – free will – given to it by God as a gift that will never be destroyed or interfered with. The *lower soul* was added to the intellect as a result of the free decision to fall away from God. It is the intellect cooled down. In its thicker state it is attracted to materiality rather than the spirit and is the source of our instincts and passions. In itself it is not evil, being able to use these derivative emotions in the loving of Christ and worship of God, but the continual danger exists that the lower soul will forget its upper partners and totally immerse itself in the flesh (the body taken as end point, seeing beings without Being). The *body* is the place where the soul enters into contingency and limitation. It exists as a second creation, made necessary by the fall of the soul, and is constructed so as to provide an image of the Image made after God (at three removes). This is where we find ourselves, cooled intellects solidified into a corporeal creation, vaguely remembering a purer time and relationship with Being, but needing to use the beauty of this world to see a greater beauty beyond, to see creation as pointing to the Great Teacher who designed it all so as to lead the soul back to him. This second creation is not evil in its constitution, for it is after all a reflection of a reflection (higher soul) of The Reflection (Christ). But if its shadowy status is forgotten and it is embraced as the only true reality, then the act of doing this becomes fleshly, darkly bruised and evil.

The education of the learning soul consists in showing it how to see through the images of its creaturely existence into the nature of the divine First Image of God shining through these figures, and in entering into union with this First Image, finally touching the bosom of God the Father. Yet this educational path is an optional one and the soul can choose to wrap itself up in the concrete images of the divine. Origen likens this decision to the Philistines filling up the well of Abraham with mire, yet points out that with Isaac (Old Testament symbol for Christ) the well can be cleared of dirt and the pure water that was always there drawn on again (*Homily on Genesis XIII*, 3–4) – as Philo well knew. If the learning soul would only base its education on the attempt to become like God through using the example of the First Image of God, it would find itself entering into a unity with this Likeness, becoming Virtue and Wisdom entire, and thus be able to see Pure Being with the same immediacy as his Son.

The key problem that faces this vision of education revolves around the nature of God – his Goodness, Omniscience and Power. If he is good and all powerful, then whatever happens to the soul was meant to be by God, so why bother in the attempt to become like God, for whatever happens is God's will? Why attempt the educational pilgrimage back to God when everything that happens is willed by God and good for us at the same time? God has already willed what is to happen, why struggle to educate ourselves? Origen squares up to this problem in his great essay *On Prayer* (especially V–VII). God has designed the world so that our actions resulting from our free wills have specific effects, effects that punish and reward us, that teach us about the correct path. God is such an excellent teacher that *all* souls will eventually come to learn, through the exercising of their free wills, what is the best path to follow and in the end become like God again. Eventually all souls will come back to God, leaving Hell empty, the saving work of Christ complete, the *massa damnata* liberated from eternal suffering, the pedagogical task of the second creation fulfilled as the Great Teacher skilfully scaffolds all fallen intellects back to him through their own free will. It is a constructivist pedagogy of enormous proportions.

### Three levels of union – flesh, spirit and God

The levels of learning that the cooled soul goes through revolve around three stages of union – with the corporeal, with the intellectual, and with the One. Effectively, this means that the learning soul can experience three types of oneness – with the flesh, with the spirit, and with God. We have a song of degrees. In the previously lost *Dialogue with Heraclides*<sup>7</sup> Origen clarifies the differences.

[W]hen human beings are joined to each other, the appropriate word is ‘flesh’, and when a just person is united to Christ, the word is ‘spirit’, and when Christ is united to the Father, the word is not ‘flesh’ or ‘spirit’, but the more prestigious word: ‘God’ (*Dialogue with Heraclides* 3.30–4.1).

The education of the soul consists of moving from a union with flesh through to a union with spirit in Christ, and then through Christ to a uniting with God, the Father. These three levels consist of different types of knowledge. At the lowest level the soul learns in a classroom at three removes from Ultimate knowledge – the cave of this physical world, made after the image of the Word of God. In this world the learning soul must recognise that it is surrounded by images of the Divine Image, that it too is precisely that, an image of a First Image. The golden rule in this classroom is that like knows Like, and so the pedagogical task is to become like God (after the famous maxim of the *Theaetetus*), progressing to becoming like his First Image, and then entering the Glory of his Presence in a perfect likeness, being in Being. Such a task involves the purification of soul to reach clear intellect and from there to touch spirit. It is the practice of continual prayer, to

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<sup>7</sup> It was found in August of 1941 near Cairo. It had been tossed into a cave – probably due to it being considered heretical. Ironical, considering that it was Heraclides being quizzed by Origen for heretical notions. The heretical nature of Origen’s work and the controversy it stirred, especially in the fifth century, is superbly traced by Elizabeth Clark’s *The Origenist controversy: the cultural construction of an early Christian debate* (1992).

immerse oneself in Humility and Love. In the free decision of the soul to pursue this educational path it hopes to meet up with the Grace of God, who in his own Freedom may decide to accept the offer. It is a pedagogical space in which two freedoms meet. There is no guarantee, as in Plato and Plotinus, that ascesis will necessarily lead to Divinity if correctly done. The Teacher in this case has free will and is not just some necessary outpouring of The Good.

The learning soul must become aware of the subtle light of the Divine streaming through this everyday world, of the Being behind the beings. It must learn to see this world as a transient image of a greater beauty, to be respected and used as an instrument of transcendence in a divine strategy of education that reveals itself through the ordinary. It is an education through the imaginary into the Real. The key danger at this stage in the educational process is idolatry – the mistaking of the image for the Real, of the vehicle for the end point. Any education that does not recognise and point to the Divine pouring through the ordinary, of Beauty lighting up being, mistakes its calling and pushes the learner into the false consciousness of shadows. It traps itself and its pupils at a third remove from the really Real, becoming entranced with shadowy mortality rather than with luminous eternity. Education must continuously recognise the value of this world as a pedagogical strategy to get the learning soul to That World of pure Being. Whether it is the signs provided by the natural world or of the Old Testament, both must be seen as fables of the truth, as guides that need to be carefully followed\interpreted, as pointers towards the greater learning that is possible for all. Even the revelations of the New Testament that bring to completion the older images of the Divine found in the prophets are not to be mistaken as the end point, for they are materializations and representations of a higher reality, of an eternal Truth that exists beyond this world of bits and pieces, words and concepts. This point can be illustrated by the many people who actually met Jesus but did not see his Divinity, for they were operating on a fleshly level (and Christ

chose not to reveal himself to them).<sup>8</sup> In order to fully see the Divine it is not enough to study the scriptures, whether they be Old or New, for they are both representations, even though the newer is closer than the older. Nor is it enough to meet Jesus in the flesh. The pedagogical task is to break away from these written and natural symbols or manifestations and come into direct contact with the *immaterial* Divine.<sup>9</sup>

This second level of education involves a learning of how to become One with Christ – in spirit.<sup>10</sup> Here the learning soul has to realize how to find and use her spiritual senses and gain a direct perception of the Divine. This involves a new way of seeing that dispenses with the medium of the sign, that does not use the mechanism of the image, that does not rely on the word, but directly participates in the unconcealed Object. It is a working through the form of intellect. A level of non-dual experience is reached where a union between subject and object is touched, where only the language of love can approximate the experience. At this level, knowledge becomes love, knowledge is love, the two modalities coalesce, the *Symposium* and the *Republic* integrate. The nature of language and the descriptions of this state need to be continually deconstructed at this level. Spiritual ‘senses’ immediately convey a subject-object duality: someone uses a sense to perceive something else. Origen points to the continual necessity to break out of this

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<sup>8</sup> Origen illustrates this through the risen Christ’s response to the doubting Thomas in John 20: 29 – ‘Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed’. Pointed out by Crouzel (1989) 76, 113.

<sup>9</sup> So we move through different levels of food for the learning soul – milk for babes, vegetables for the weak and solid food for the mature who are able to work beyond the physical with their spiritual senses (*On Prayer* XXVII).

<sup>10</sup> As we shift onto the intellectual plane, we encounter Christ and the Spirit, neither of whom are in anyway material. Along with God the Father they are absolutely immaterial, omniscient, and holy. Other created intellects have ethereal bodies, according to Origen, but the Divine Persons have no bodies and are not in a body (*On First Principles* IV, 27) – hence the need for spiritual senses. Furthermore, unlike the essentially limited and imperfect knowledge of created intellects the Divine Persons were and are in a state of full knowledge (*Contra Celsum* VI, 17).

reform school way of seeing things and enter into a world of Communion, where the logic of identity takes on its full force and two separate beings finally KNOW each other by becoming One in an opening. Here there is just the Sense, no 'I' or 'You' to take control, simply the experience without a self-image to check out how it is doing while the experience is happening. There is a letting be, a releasement.

Origen's writings on the spiritual senses had a profound influence on the pedagogy of the soul, for he opened up a way of thinking and stating how the soul comes to learn about the Divine. Just as the body has five senses to experience the physical world, so does the higher soul have senses to experience and contemplate the Divine World.<sup>11</sup> Yet these

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<sup>11</sup> Reference to the spiritual senses is pervasive in the writings of Origen, used extensively in the Commentaries on the *Song of Songs*, *John*, *Luke* and *Romans*, the *Homilies on Leviticus*, *Ezekiel* and the *Dialogue with Heraclides*. One of the most concise statements is found in *On First Principles* I, 1. 9. 'Here, if any one lay before us the passage where it is said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,' from that very passage, in my opinion, will our position derive additional strength; for what else is seeing God in heart, but... understanding and knowing him with the mind? For the names of the organs of sense are frequently applied to the soul, so that it may be said to see with the eyes of the heart, *i.e.* to perform an intellectual act by means of the power of intelligence. So also it is said to hear with the ears when it perceives the deeper meaning of a statement. So also we say that it makes use of teeth, when it chews and eats the bread of life which cometh down from heaven. In like manner, also, it is said to employ the services of other members, which are transferred from their bodily appellations and applied to the powers of the soul, according to the words of Solomon, 'You will find a divine sense.' For he knew that there were within us two kinds of senses: the one mortal, corruptible, human; the other immortal and intellectual, which he now termed divine.' It is these senses which are developed when contemplating the Word of God and through him the Father – as gracefully caught in the *Song of Songs*. These senses help distinguish between good and evil, divine and mortal, spirit and flesh. More importantly they capture what happens to the senses when they work in a non-dual way, without the filter of an ego forcing them into selfish (or unselfish) directions. As interesting as Origen's elaborations are, they do not compare to the detailed working out by Plotinus of how the senses change as levels of union are worked through. This is the danger of analogy in interpretation in comparison to direct description – Origen had to use scripture and give its many details a divine interpretation, whereas Plotinus was free to build from whatever sources he chose and describe precisely what he experienced – without having to use the language of scripture to catch it.

spiritual senses are dulled by vice and lack of use and need to be opened again. Here the work of pedagogy takes on its full calling. Through the Grace of God and the reading of the Word, these senses can be rediscovered and through practice become well used, opening out the learner to her full range of potentiality.

The learning soul must stabilize itself on this level of wisdom, must transfigure itself so that its lower soul and body now respond totally to intellect. A key question at this point becomes what to make of the claims of the Philosophers, who describe this level of learning well? Origen is both sympathetic and harsh towards his philosophical counterparts, as was Philo with the Chaldeans. He recognises the value of their positions and even taught their work to his students, but the philosophers come towards the Divine *for reasons*. They deduce God's existence and hold moral positions that are well argued for, that have been thought about, that come from the dialectic of rationality. Where, Origen asks, is their personal relationship to God, where is their lived engagement with the reality of the Divine?<sup>12</sup> It is not enough to think and reason about The Good, the Beautiful and the True, for rationality is not enough to lift one into the Divine. Thinking about the nature of Sin does not help one triumph over Sin. It may help along the way, but more than philosophy will be needed to transform the body and soul. The education provided by the Encyclic Studies and Philosophy must be seen like the 'fair captive' of Deuteronomy 21: 10–13, a beautiful woman captured from the enemies in war whom you wish to marry. First shave her head, trim her nails and remove the clothes of her captivity before marrying her – get rid of what is dead and useless in Philosophy before entering (Crouzel [1989] 159). Another powerful image that Origen uses to drive the point home is that of the 'spoils of the Egyptians'. Just like the Jews had to build their tabernacle from materials taken from their Egyptian counterparts, so too can the booty of Philosophy be used to help build a relationship towards God. Philosophy belongs to the realm of events and thoughts before the Revelation of Christ. At best it can be equated with the

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<sup>12</sup> I follow Crouzel (1989) 156–163 quite closely over here.

natural world and old scripture as an image that allows the glory of God to shine through, but its tendency to continuously work on the level of reasons militates against it facilitating the full experiencing of this second level of learning – of experiencing union of spirit. It loses the ability to experience due to its emphasis on the importance of justification. It is in celebration of this kind of union beyond reasons that specific scriptural texts exist to teach and inspire us, to point us towards in a showing, none more so than *Song of Songs*.

The *Song of Songs* occurs as a depiction of the final phase of the curriculum of the learning soul reaching for union with spirit. The first two stages are represented by *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*.<sup>13</sup> The wise sayings of *Proverbs* provide a guide to the rules of living a good, ordered life in a morally upright fashion. It gives instruction in how to behave wisely, of how to learn about justice, righteousness and equity, of how to develop prudence and discretion, and increase understanding. It teaches the learning soul how to correctly order itself. It is a learning that makes a good and upright citizen, similar to that of the released prisoner in Plato's Cave contemplating the fire, and of the decent citizens of Chaldea. It is the path that leads into purgation. Once this process is well established the learning soul can move onto the next phase of seeing the natural world for what it is – a manifestation of the incorruptible in the corruptible – a world beyond the astronomers. The world of objects must be correctly worked within, the use of objects rightly executed, their evanescent character as shadow fully recognised. The student must practice seeing the vanity of vanities, and learn to cry out with her soul – All is futile: endeavour is vain; earthly wisdom is vain; pleasure and possessions are vain; for in the end dust will return to dust and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Even the statement of this vision in books is dangerous, for although it should serve as nails given by One Shepherd and driven home into the soul, the warning is sounded that 'the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body' (*Ecclesiastes* 12, 12). The soul must learn to shake off the mortal coil, see deeply into the impermanence of existence, taste the futility of life, enter existential darkness before she is ready to enter

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<sup>13</sup> This is clearly laid out by Origen in the Prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

into the Higher learning of the *Song of Songs*, for it is only in the correct seeing of this world's momentariness that the learning soul releases itself out to a deeper and higher reality. First the learning soul must despair of all things, even its images of God, fall through death after death into Darkness. It is the same 'leakage' described by Plato in the *Symposium* before embarking up the ladder of Beauty. First contemplate the vanity of this world before entering into union with the Word. It is to this lithe little book, suddenly gaping with Beauty after the soul has been cleansed and directly seen the impermanence of the natural order, that we now turn.

### **Bride and Bridegroom**

Our two lovers have met before, indeed they were once in a state of blissful union in the First Creation, united in their love for each other and their Father, walking in the lighting of Being. The bride, however, grew tired of this heavenly state and longed to experience something different. Her ardour cooled and she fell away, entering this earthly world, finding her ethereal body suddenly hardening into flesh and bone.<sup>14</sup> A part of her still loved the Bridegroom, but now she could not see him clearly anymore, for her eyes were made to see material things, her ears to hear noise, her nose to smell earthy fragrances, her hands to touch flesh. The Father, in his love and concern for her, designed a world that suited her new senses and way of being. This new world contained all the beauty and glory it possibly could, but because it had to be adapted to the fallen state of the bride, it took on the material forms of existence. This world was ingenuously created to teach the bride about her earlier state, to remind her of the loving union she once enjoyed. It was hoped that she would learn from this schoolroom and long to return to the original place where her Bridegroom and Father waited for her. The Bridegroom often sent messages

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<sup>14</sup> All created beings necessarily have some type of body, ranging from the ethereal sheaths of intellects to the fleshly bodies of human beings. Depending on how close one was to God, so the nature of the matter shifted, becoming more luminous and transparent with each approaching step. Matter thus existed in the first creation, but only in the second creation did it take on the heavy forms we now associate with it (*On First Principles* II, 2. 2).

and visions down to her through the prophets and other representatives, but eventually he could stand it no longer. He entered materiality, even though he had never stopped loving his Father, and come down to save his bride and ask her to return with him in love to the Father, to wake her to the moment of Love.

This allegory of the bride and Bridegroom was unpacked in two main registers by Origen: the relationship between the Church<sup>15</sup> and Christ; and the relationship between the learning soul and the Word of God. As this thesis is more interested in the second relationship I will give it more emphasis – *the bride will search for her Bridegroom in her innermost being*. Let us begin by briefly introducing the fascinating and complex characters who will reveal themselves as the Drama unfolds.

*The Father*: His status as a ‘character’ is problematic as he combines within himself the tension between the Self Sufficient One of Parmenides and the Loving, Suffering God of the Testaments. He is an uncompounded intellectual nature admitting within himself no addition of any kind. He cannot be believed to have within him a greater and a less, or to be a composite being. He is totally immaterial, uncontained by time and space, beyond any material creation. He is the source from which all intellectual nature or mind takes its beginning. He is the foundation of being that is Beyond Being, the grounding Abyss (*On First Principles* I, 6. 2; *Contra Celsum* VII, 38). Yet at the same time he feels Love, he

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<sup>15</sup> The Church is co-extensive with all rational beings, and as such is inclusive of all humanity, for we all contain the higher soul within us. It is a universal church, a catholic church, a symbol of what our highest achievement could be on the social level. This is a crucial dimension of Origen’s commentary, and provides a network of support for the learning soul that we do not find in Plotinus. It is a thinking through of the nature of the Divine on a social level – on the level of the many, rather than the one. It is the most vital of dimensions, for we are social beings. Our educational techniques in the modern west focus powerfully on this dimension, with sociological, political, economic and cultural disciplines directed towards this level. Although I hint at this level throughout this thesis, and feel its importance, I have chosen to focus in on a specific level, the Interior of the Individual as Wilber (1995) calls it.

weeps and rejoices for us and cared enough to send his only Son down to redeem us. He exists as both the Reality and Ground of the play and as an Actor within the play.

*The Son/Bridegroom:* The Son exists as the radiance of the Father, being eternally and continually generated from him, an effulgence of the Glory of God who uninterruptedly contemplates the depths of his Father, the breath of the power of God, the stainless mirror of God's working, the pure image of his Goodness, the first Opening of Being to Being. He is never separate from his Father, existing in him as a non-duality where subject and object are One and have the same love for each other because they are One. Yet the Oneness is different. The Father is absolutely One, whereas the Son has many titles, for He is One who is also Many, the One who pours out and then turns back in contemplation. He is God's will as it meets creation, the mediator. Just as we find a multiplicity of Ideas and Forms in the Intellectual World, so too do we find many titles for Christ (like Wisdom and Logos). Pure light opens out its spectrum. It is through Christ that everything that is made has both its model and its formation. Christ is both the Intellectual-Principle and the Demi-Urge (Universal Soul), both the plan and the path through which everything is created (*On First Principles* I, 2). Christ contains all the creative power of creation in his Wisdom, he is the beginning of the ways of God and discloses to all the nature and mystery of God, just as a smaller but identical statue would capture for us what a massive statue beyond our capacity for vision looks like. He is the first thought of God, one with God as thought is to thinker when occurring in a non-dual mode. Together with his bride, who is made after his Image, he celebrates the Glory of God in unconcealment.

*The bride:* She was the first creation of God through the Son and represents all the rational intellects in their contemplation of God. As a combination of all rational intellects she represents the pre-existent Church. Nothing but freely rational intellects were created in this first great outpouring. 'In the beginning all intellectual natures were created equal and alike, as God had no motive for creating them otherwise' (*On First Principles* II, 9. 6). As an individuality, she was a pure mind existing in an ethereal body,

made *after* the image of God, able to join with the Son in a Union that contemplates the Father, but crucially endowed with a free will to decide against this course, if so desired. In this first creation, she entered into union with the Word, and was thus able to contemplate the Father through the Son. At this level God freely revealed himself to all rational creatures through his Son, all were openings\lightings of Being. Although this pure mind (intellect) is her defining feature, she also has been given the gift of the spirit that exists in her as pure divinity, incorruptible, unchangeable, and not damaged by sin. It is this part of her that enables the possibility of conversion after the falling away from God occurred, for it is always already a part of the grounding Abyss, of that which lets Being be. The fall happened when she became bored and satiated with all the contemplation and cooled down in her fervour towards God, part of her intellect becoming soul. She neglected her Bridegroom and began to forget in whose image she was created, beginning to assert, through her free will, her difference. This necessitated a second creation, a terrestrial world of matter for these souls to live in. Depending on how much the intellects cooled, so they landed in different places, becoming either Angels, Stars, Humans, or Devils. All the different types arise as a consequence of their own free choice to fall away from the happiness of God, entering a separately embodied existence, plunging deeper and deeper into the seizures of materiality. It is to this human world of the fallen bride that we now turn for the drama to follow.

We begin with the captivating bride (our learning soul) who has now had enough of the ministrations of other teachers, whether they be angels, prophets or philosophers. Tired of this cooled world, she longs for the actual loving touch of her Bridegroom, for his Wisdom to pour directly from his mouth into hers, from mouth to Mouth. She longs to enter his bridal chamber and come into the mysteries of his wisdom and divinity left for so long. She has received his betrothal gifts of natural law, of reason, and of free will, has been educated and instructed in the classroom of images by the masters of the past and the beauty of the present. The education of the world has taken effect. Now she longs for her purified mind to be illumined by the Word of God himself, for a direct inspiration where the breath of Divine Wisdom descends and kisses her. She longs for the

Outpouring Son to lift her up absolutely into his presence so that together she may take one more step with him, a step into the oneness of the Father. In the dark quiet of the night she whispers '*let him kiss me with the kisses of the mouth (Commentary on the Song of Songs I, 1)*'. She longs for the bosom of Christ, the place and heart of the holy teachings. She has been intoxicated by the mature teachings of wise philosophers and drunk in the prophets and sages of the Old Testament, but this is not enough. They have taught her and shown her the way to Christ, now they must be left behind, just as Abram had to leave Chaldea for Haran and the Wilderness. The new teachings of Christ are more fragrant than any she has scented before. The old spices of the Jewish Law, of moral teaching and natural philosophy cannot satisfy her longing anymore, and she yearns for the direct experiencing of Wisdom, of Logos, of the breasts of Christ (*Commentary on the Song of Songs I, 2*). She longs to step out of the cave of shadows into the light of the pure Form and in anticipatory excitement cries out '*Thy breasts are better than wine and the fragrance of thine ointments is above all spices*'.

She is not alone in her longing. Maiden souls also run after him behind her, growing in beauty and truth, made new and stronger each day in the Image of God, for his name is as ointment emptied out and together they run after him into his fragrance. Among the heathen they have scented the body of Divinity entering this world as Jesus, suddenly finding themselves able to draw near to God as he emptied himself out into the world. They have heard the Word of God and understood the grandeur of his Sacrifice, his Passion, his Redemption. The odour of the Divine draws them on, bringing them running towards him. They have been lightened and prepared by the study and practice of proper morality, correct conduct (*Proverbs*) and the understanding of the mortality of earthly things (*Ecclesiastes*). Now they scent the ineffable perfume of Divinity and run towards it. They are attracted to his Name, and as Origen points out—

If all these things were brought about by virtue of his Name alone, what do you think his very Self would do? What strength, what vigour will these maidens get from it, if ever they are able by some means to attain to his actual,

incomprehensible, unutterable Self? I think myself that if they ever did attain to this, they would no longer walk or run, but, bound as it were by the bands of his love, they would cleave to him, and would have no further power ever to move again (*Commentary on the Song of Songs I, 4*).

To experience the very Self of Christ is to transcend the handed down writings about him and the physical Incarnation he took on earth, for that was his 'Shadow' and as beautiful as it was, the Word of God existed in a transcendent Form before the materialization, and does so now, enabling a direct, living, loving, contact with him through the purified soul (the intellect). This pouring out of God in Christ has allowed not only the bride of Christ to re-enter a loving relationship with him, but also allowed the gentiles (maidens) to pursue the same relationship.

This contact is expressed tangibly through the senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight, but these are not the bodily faculties, but the senses of the 'inner man', of the purified soul. There is a tender kiss, but it is without lips, an arousing touch, but without hands, a hunger for his taste, but without body. The *Song of Songs* must be read with an ear that hears the divine message, that does not get lustful as the words impact, as the kiss arouses, but transforms these material images into the spiritual meaning streaming through them, feeling the Divine energy pouring out.

The young love of the maidens is different to the mature love of the bride. Her education has reached further, she is ready for the direct contact of the Kiss rather than the aroma of perfection. She enters the Kings chambers and experiences direct contact with the Wisdom of God, the Word of God, the Son of God, the Image of God – Christ. Here she straightforwardly experiences the dark treasures of things hidden and unseen. She loves the Bridegroom totally for who he is, not for his effects. For her his breasts are better than wine and the fragrance of his ointments is above all spices, while the Maidens still love him for what he represents, has enabled and achieved. For them his name is *as* ointment poured out. She loves the direct experience of Christ while the maidens still prefer the intoxication of the wine to its bringer and anticipate loving Christ more later on. They are

still young and receiving the first-fruits of instruction, being enchanted with their tutors and teachers, not fully mature enough to be stirred by the Bridegroom's breasts and the direct contact this represents. They are still caught in images and words. So they will stay for a while with their teacher concubines in the material world before entering directly into marriage with Wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

Standing against the bride is the full resistance of Jewish tradition, the daughters of Jerusalem, who claim God for themselves. The bride embraces her paganism, her sin, her lowliness, her not having a pure bloodline, for into this has come the Word of God rejected by the daughters. The grace of forgiveness has broken into her. She cries out in the most starkly arresting line of the song '*I am dark and beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon*'. Just as the Pagan Queen of Sheba fell in love with Solomon after hearing word of his Wisdom and found, when meeting him face to face, that he was beyond words, so too will the learning soul find itself enamoured by the direct encounter with the Word of God. The darkness will open, just as the curtains of the tabernacle of God open to reveal his glory (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 1).

But the bride has not met her Love face to face in the Light, she does not know where to find him, and cries out into the darkness '*Tell me, O Thou whom my soul has loved, where Thou feedest, where Thou hast Thy couch in the midday*'. She longs for his full presence, experienced in full light, like Abraham at the oak of Mamre who was visited at midday by God. She is fearful that her veil, declaring her readiness for the visit of the Word, will be seen as the mere garments of learning. She does not wish to consort with

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<sup>16</sup> Effectively the maidens stand third in line, behind the bride and the concubines, enjoying the shadows of light 'In this marriage drama we must take it that some souls who are associated with the Bridegroom in a nobler and more splendid sort of love, have with him the status and the love of queens; others whose dignity in respect of progress and the virtues is undoubtedly less, rank as His concubines; and others again are in the position of maidens who are placed outside the palace, though not outside the royal city' (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 4).

Christ's companions (the sages, prophets and teachers of Wisdom) but longs for a breath-to-breath meeting in the radiance of full Glory. She does not want to be separate any longer. She has had enough of hidden games and aches to merge with him. The sayings have paled in the ache for a showing. She fears that if she does not follow the right path to his resting place that Christ's companions might mistake her Bridal Veil for the covering philosophers pull over the Divine, and thus fault her as yet another masking of the Truth, not seeing her Bridal Veil for what it really is – the necessary garments for her marriage to pure Wisdom. She fears going astray through lack of instruction and landing up learning from those who teach the Wisdom of the world and not of God, of those who veil the Glory of God in his images, and teach more about the masks of God than of God himself (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 4).

In the darkness of the waiting she hears the whisper of the Bridegroom, but they are words of warning, an instruction that in order to enter him she must first have looked deeply into herself. '*Unless though know thyself, O good one among women, go forth in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed thy goats among the shepherds' tents*'. The first words spoken by the Bridegroom come with the injunction 'know thyself' made famous by Socrates but anticipated long before by Solomon. Origen expands on what is meant by this injunction by taking on the voice of the Bridegroom–

'Unless thou hast known thyself, O fair one among women, and hath recognised whence the ground of thy beauty proceeds – namely, that thou wast created in God's Image, so that there is in thee an abundance of natural beauty; unless though hast thus realized how fair thou wast in the beginning...unless though hast done this, I command thee to go forth and put thyself at the very back of the flocks... And though, when thou wast brought into the royal chamber, I may have shown thee things that are supremely good, if though know not thyself, I shall show thee also things that are supremely bad' (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 5).

This is a stern warning towards the learning soul to beware of entering this greater learning without full preparation, of over reaching the learning and falling into various pathologies of the soul.<sup>17</sup> So how does a soul know itself according to Origen? The process is twofold: the soul must recognise what she is in herself; and identify what motives lie behind her actions. The second process involves a continual awareness of dispositions and intentions in a manner that does not pretend or lie, that does not make up better motives than are actually present. It ranges over intellectual, emotional and practical areas, focusing on anger and gloominess, on sadness and rejoicing, aware of how clever verbal presentations and pretty ideas affect her while clearly recognising what must be done and what must be avoided. The first process involves a more difficult labour, for it involves a direct seeing of what the nature of soul is. This is only possible in the light of a knowledge of the Trinity. The forty-fifth psalm says – Be still and know that I am God. This knowledge can only come through a gift from the Holy Spirit,<sup>18</sup> which will help her to see directly into her nature – whether she is corporeal or incorporeal, made or unmade, similar or different to other souls. It is the same internal world that Abram entered with Haran. Through silent prayer, detachment and inspired meditation on the Word of God, such questions will be answered and allow the purified soul that knows itself to enter the level of spirit – a face to face relationship with Wisdom, with Logos, with the Forms, with Christ.

The bride blushes at the severity of her Love's injunction, and this makes her even lovelier than before and from his place of watching he whispers '*How lovely have thy cheeks become, as are the turtle-dove's.*' Her modesty and recognition of the truth of the

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<sup>17</sup> Dante gives the same warning to his readers as Paradise is approached (*Paradiso*, I).

<sup>18</sup> We do not find a developed understanding of the Holy Spirit in Origen as the controversies surrounding His nature were still in the future. Origen sees him as a definite 'intelligence' apart from the Son and the Father, but *not* as the third hypostases of middle Platonism (the Universal Soul/ Demiurge). He exists, along with The Son, on the Intellectual Level, although precisely what He does is left undeveloped by Origen. See Crouzel (1989) 198–204 for a good discussion of what can be gleaned from the writings of Origen on the Holy Spirit.

command make her more beautiful, and like turtle-doves who love only one mate for their whole lives, so is the love of the purified soul for the Word of God becoming (*Commentary on the Song of Songs II, 7*). Yet his description of her still uses the comparative 'like', for she has not unified with the Spirit, only become like it, her education in non-duality is incomplete.

Knowing now that he is close she pours out her essence towards him and finds in the process that her dispersed concentrate has become filled with his. In wonder she murmurs *'My spikenard has yielded its odour. Her quintessence has touched her Bridegroom's* body and taken on his scent. In the same way that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with spikenard and wiped off the excess with her hair, receiving back into herself the ointment given, the fragrance of divinity filling her head (*John 12, 3*), so is the experience of the bride. When the learning soul pours out its most precious essence into the Divine, it will find that it takes on the scent of divinity itself (*Commentary on the Song of Songs II, 9*).

It is a dispersal that collects itself, that is bound and held together between the breasts of the bride. The experience concentrates itself at the core, is held close and the bride whispers *'A sachet of a myrrh-drop is my Nephew to me, he shall abide between my breasts'*. The scent, which up to this instant has been diffused, is now concentrated, bound and held together between the breasts of the bride. (In terms of the reading between Church and Christ this symbolizes Christ taking on flesh, becoming concentrated at a point, a 'drop' of perfume) She declares that she will love the Word of God with all her heart, keep his divine teachings and his concentrated existence at the core of her being (*Commentary on the Song of Songs II, 10*). She has reached a moment of pure concentration where the scent of the divine holds in her core, pervading her bareness with the essence of essence.

Now her Love speaks to her, and it is not with words of warning. *'Behold, thou art fair, my neighbour; behold thou art fair. Thine eyes are doves.* His intensity is increasing. Without any qualification he simply tells her – thou art fair. She is coming close, now she neighbours him. Her eyes can see the divine mysteries clearly, without intermediaries.

She sees with the Holy Spirit (emblem of the Dove), flying with its wings to the heights of Wisdom. She is now seeing purely, seeing with spiritual eyes, stabilized within this state in a non-dual way. He does not say ‘thine eyes are *like doves*’ (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 1). It is not an approximation any longer, a level of non-dual seeing has been reached. There is no comparative, union has been touched, Being is released.<sup>19</sup>

Looking at her Beloved with spiritual eyes she now sees just how beautiful and good her Bridegroom is. This immense glory is so powerful that it permeates her body, making it soft and fertile with good works. In love she cries out ‘*Behold, Thou art good, my Nephew, behold, Thou art fair indeed. Our bed is shady*. Her purity has washed throughout her being, making her ready in body and soul for the entry of the Word (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 2). Their place of lying together, their own clearing, awaits the unconcealment. She has become a quiet meadow allowing the Word to enlarge within.

He responds to the opening. ‘*I am the Flower of the field and the Lily of the valleys; as the lily among the thorns, so is my neighbour among the daughters*. She has become his field through her simplicity and evenness, thus allowing the Flower of the Word of God to begin to grow. As wisdom deepens and becomes a valley, moving from the surface of things to their deeper meanings, so the Word of God becomes a Lily and allows the learning soul to become like it in Wisdom and Virtue (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 4). The soul is beginning to bear the creative fruits of union, flowering outwards in an inward growth of beauty deep within.

She feels his intensification, experiences his expansion within and reaches out into herself to taste him, melodiously chanting ‘*As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my Nephew among the sons; in his shadow I desired and sat, and his fruit was sweet*

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<sup>19</sup> Synesthesia partly captures what happens in this union of spirit – the eyes touch, the lips see, the ears feel, all in a manner that leads to a rich encounter with the Divine.

*in my throat.*' Among all the teachings of this world, it is the Word of Christ that is sweetest, so the learning soul sits under the shadow of Christ and eats from his fruits. By the shadow of Christ we have progressed from the shadow of the Old Testament Law, entering into the shade of Grace. The shadow of Christ is his incarnation on this earth and the writings of the Disciples. The learning soul must take this as a riddle to meditate on it until the truth of it lights her up on the inside and she comes face to face with the Wisdom of Christ as a lived relation. She moves from the shadow of Christ in his incarnation and the words he addressed to his disciples to a direct encounter with the living, immaterial Christ in her heart, to the Being of his being (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 5).

He is so close, his scent so overpowering, his taste so natural, that she longs for more intoxication, to enter into the *house of wine*, to stand outside herself in ecstasy and enter the Greater Other.<sup>20</sup> She desires to enter the Royal feast so that she may enjoy the fruits of entering the Bridegroom's chambers, the Wisdom and Joy offered there (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 6). A time of rapture is beginning, of wild nights. It is within this elevation that she now perceives the depths of height, of how contained within this Great Love are hierarchies within hierarchies. In recognition of the sudden increase in her depth she entreats her Love '*Set ye in order charity in me*'. Although the bride loves All

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<sup>20</sup> Rumi captures this 'house of wine' well in his poem *Intoxicated by Love*. I quote the first and last stanzas:

Because of your love  
I have lost my sobriety  
I am intoxicated  
By the madness of love

Drunk with the ecstasy of love  
I can no longer tell the difference  
Between drunkard and drink  
Between Lover and Beloved.

(Chopra [1998] 43)

as herself, this does not mean that she must not learn the different orders of love within this one great love. Love at bedrock is indiscriminate, but above this level discriminating Orders of Charity build, ranging from enemies to friends, family and loved ones, from physical and cosmic to holy. The bride must become intelligent and experienced in this realm, elaborating on the different forms of love within the greater labyrinth (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 7). Christ loved all, but this did not prevent his critique of the Pharisees, his chasing the traders from the Temple, his distinguishing between Martha and Mary. Once the sea of love is entered, one must learn to navigate its various moods.<sup>21</sup>

It is a sea of overwhelming power, a sea that cannot be entered without cost, without a tearing open of the self, a gashing that renders in emergency. In the entering she cries out '*I am wounded by love*'. Origen comments:

If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wound of him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of his knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for him by day and night...–if such there be, that soul then says in truth: 'I have been wounded by Charity' (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 8).

He uses this line to telling effect in his commentary. He points out that 'God is Love' (I John 4.8) and thus the soul can say, when God strikes it with Love, that it has been wounded by Love. There is an agony to love, a burning that marks the entrance of God.

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<sup>21</sup> It is at this point that the nature of physical love and its relationship to Pure Love becomes crystal clear. We tend to think of love as being a sublimation of lust in our modern times and cannot help but chuckle at the obvious repression going on as poor Origen grapples with his hidden lust and expresses it in the form of love for God. Certainly, when in the grip of lust this is how it appears, but seen from the other side, from the side of Pure Love, lust is but a wave of a massive sea, a recognised part, a used part but not the main part. This is what makes the use of the very physical Song of Songs to express the entry into Pure Love so profound, it includes and transcends the energies of lust within its deeper companion.

She is now so close that she touches him and the experience is so overwhelming that it gashes her with the power (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 8).

Yet it is an entry that leaves, only to come again, and then leave. With each entry he comes closer, *leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills*, before dancing away again. We get a sense of the coming and going of the Word of God as the learning soul seeks after him. She may have entered his chambers, but he leaves and then she has to go searching for him, until suddenly he comes leaping towards her again (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 11).<sup>22</sup> In the love play he comes closer and closer, hinting at his presence, tantalizing her with glimpses, until she sees him behind the wall of her corporality, leaning against the window of her inner senses, looking in through the nets of her pane, standing just beyond her core, gazing in. Finally he speaks to her once more:

*Arise, come, my neighbour, my fair one, my dove; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is gone and has departed to itself, the flowers have appeared on the earth, the time of pruning is come, the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land, the fig tree hath put forth her buds, the vines in flower have yielded their sweet smell.*

The bride is called outdoors, is solicited to leave her bodily senses and the experiencing of the Bridegroom through the windows of scripture and doctrine. She must arise from reclining in corporeal things and follow her Bridegroom into pure spiritual experience through the gate of love. The winter of her personal disorders and the storms of her vices

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<sup>22</sup> Although this aspect of the relationship between the learning soul and the Word of God is emphasized by Origen, it is not given the weight that later Christian thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa would grant it, turning the coming and going into a negative theology so key to the education of the learning soul. In Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* he captures the experience of God as always being partly an absence, for every knowing is a limitation and therefore a missing of the essence of God (McGinn [1991] 139–142). Origen is clearly located in the Ancient world where the Divine is close, pouring through the cracks of materiality. Slowly, with the development of Christianity, the divine world removed itself, leaving a gaping chasm between creator and created, resulting in key shifts in the learning strategies for the soul. But this is a later chapter on Augustine.

have departed allowing the flowers of virtue to burgeon within her. With pruning of her affections and perceptions a new and startling growth will be enabled where the voice of the deep wisdom of God will be heard. Her spirit will now show the results of her love for Christ with the buds of love, joy and peace (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* III, 14).

But this is not enough, she must surrender all in total seclusion, leaving culture, meaning and symbol behind, enter a place where lover and beloved are only inadequate words. He calls her to '*arise and come, my neighbour, my fair one, my dove; in the shelter of the rock by the outwork show me thy face, and let me hear thy voice; for thy voice is sweet, and thy face is fair.* He is calling her to go beyond the walls that surround the city, to go to the outwork – the wall beyond the walls of the city where she can, in isolated shelter, take off her veil and show her face to the Bridegroom. He calls her to leave everything that the world contains, everything physical and temporal, and to hasten towards the unseen and eternal, to open the veil of her mind and enter Mystery. On this new path she will make her way under the covering of rock, protected by the solid teachings of Christ, until finally she will come safely to that secret place where she may behold the glory of the Lord with an open face, where lover, loving and loved become One. Her face will be fair for it is being renewed on a daily basis according to the Image of him who created it, not having a spot or blemish on it. She will be able to speak with a voice that is sweet with the Word of God. In this face to face meeting with her Bridegroom, the bride will finally reach the end point of her longing, for she will at last again touch the bosom of the *Father*. Origen puts this tentatively, as it suggests a further stage of development beyond that of union with Christ.

[T]he outwork may be the bosom of the Father, whence the Only-begotten Son declares all things and tells his Church whatsoever things are hidden in the secrets of the Father's heart. Wherefore also one that was taught by him said: *No man hath seen God at any time; the Only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.* Thither, therefore, does Christ call his bride, alike to teach her about all things that are with the Father, and to say: *I have made*

*known to you all things which I have heard of my Father, and yet again to say: Father, I will that where I am, they also...may be with me (Commentary on the Song of Songs III,14).*

In union with the Word of God, the learning soul finally comes into direct contact with the Father. This is the tentative ending that Origen leaves us with. Unfortunately, the later commentaries on the *Song of Songs* have been destroyed and lost, leaving this possible development suggestively open.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The loss is distressing as the very next chapter contains some of the most beautiful lines of the Song.

'On my bed night after night I sought him  
Whom my soul loves;  
I sought him but did not find him.  
I must arise now and go about the city;  
In the streets and in the squares  
I must seek him whom my soul loves.  
I sought him but did not find him.

Yet even these lines cannot compare with the exquisite tenderness and torment of chapter 5 which captures the entering and leaving of the Divine from the learning soul.

I was asleep, but my heart was awake.  
A voice! My beloved was knocking;  
'Open to me, my sister, my darling,  
My dove, my perfect one!  
For my head is drenched with dew,  
My locks with the damp of the night.'  
I have taken off my dress,  
How can I put it on again?  
I have washed my feet,  
How can I dirty them again?  
My beloved extended his hand through the opening,  
And my feelings were aroused for him.  
I arose to open to my beloved;

Like the teachings of Diotima and Rebecca pointing towards the clear Stream, Origen takes the learning soul on an anticipatory journey that captures the nature of a personal experiencing of union with the Word. It is an experience that goes beyond words on a page and images of creation, pushing towards a face to face meeting of lovers united in overwhelming Love, released in a lighting where two freedoms meet.<sup>24</sup>

A difficult question remains – the extent to which the role of Christ becomes secondary as the learning soul reaches for its final goal of the bosom of the Father, of union with God. We will see how the Intellectual-Principle is superseded in Plotinus’ pedagogical account of finally lifting into the One. Does the same thing happen to Christ in Origen’s account – does the Divine Son become merely the Door, the Way, that opens out towards a final Union with God? Are there any differences between a union of spirit and a Union of God? Is this last level of Union not possible for the learning soul, must she always be at one remove from the Father, enjoying his presence only through his Son? All that has preceded this point has captured the nature of the second kind of union, of the learning soul with the Word of God – it recaptures the initial state of the higher soul as an opening

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And my hands dripped with myrrh,  
 And my fingers with liquid myrrh,  
 On the handles of the bolt.  
 I opened to my beloved,  
 But my beloved had turned away and had gone!  
 My heart went out to him as he spoke.  
 I searched for him, but I did not find him;  
 I called him, but he did not answer me.  
 The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me,  
 They struck me and wounded me;  
 The guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me.

<sup>24</sup> If we look for a negative parallel to the bride-Bridegroom consummation of pure love, we can find it in the tragic tradition of Greek and Elizabethan drama. In Sophocles’ *Antigone* we have the *death* of the bride Antigone and her bridegroom Haemon, *destroyed* by the father (Creon) rather than uplifted into his arms. In the Shakespeare chapter we will explore how both of these traditions – transcendent love and tragedy – are integrated into the human condition, but only after enormous suffering on the tragic tree.

to Being. Yet this is an ambiguous union. On the one side it describes the experience of divine understanding and inspiration descending as one reads the Word of God (scripture). On the other side, this inspirational mode results in a direct experiencing of the living Christ without the intermediaries of words or symbols. The confusing element is that Christ is himself the first Image of God, so in effect it is still an image that is being experienced in the Face to Face – it is the Word, the Logos. Yet the encounter and union with this founding Image effectively opens up for the learning soul the experience that the First Image has of God – it enables a Union with God, the Highest Learning of stepping into the Grounding. Here the logic of like knowing Like reaches its apotheosis, for it enables the soul, in its becoming like Christ, to become one with God – like Christ – to step into Life Itself.

We struggle to find a full accounting of this last stage of learning in Origen. The most celebrated account of his own experiencing of the Divine seems to rest, like Philo, on the level of union with the Word of God, yet it ends with a statement that supports an experiencing of the highest level. Here is the account.

The bride then beholds the Bridegroom; and he, as soon as she has seen him, goes away. He does this frequently throughout the Song; and that is something nobody can understand who has not suffered it himself. God is my witness that I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing near me and being most intensely present with me; then suddenly he has withdrawn and I could not find him, though I sought to do so. I long therefore for him to come again, and sometimes he does so. Then when he has appeared and I lay hold of him, he slips away once more. And when he has so slipped away my search for him begins anew. So does he act with me repeatedly, *until in truth I hold him and go up, 'leaning on my Nephew's arm'* (*Homilies on the Song of Songs* I, 7, my emphasis)

It is the last line that is of interest here – ‘in truth I hold him and go up’. Origen describes for us the process of finally reaching stabilization on the intellectual level – ‘in truth I hold him’ – and then the result of this when he *goes up* to God, leaning on Christ, the

entering of the One. This level is described as knowing God. We have already seen that 'knowing' is more than just understanding at this level, it is a uniting in love. Effectively this means that the learning soul, through Christ, can enter into Union with God, can know God, become one with God, directly experience Pure Being. It may be impossible to formulate a conception of God that is rich enough but this does not mean that his presence cannot be 'known', cannot be entered into in love. Both the higher soul and Christ can contemplate the depths of their Father in unbroken unity, and become One. The crucial proviso is the 'become', for both are a plurality entering the unitary, duality becoming non-dual. The difference between Christ and the higher soul is only one of degree. The Word of God never left the Unity, even when entering the corporeal world, whereas the fallen soul has tasted separation and must use the unfallen Son as a mediator to get back to the Father. The Son exists as the first seeing of the Divine, as the Divine coming to know itself as Divine, as the First opening of Being to Being. It is in the image of this 'Knowledge' that our intellect is formed. So it is by a progression through Images of the Same, through like becoming Like God, that our education occurs. It is pedagogy of reflection, a pedagogy of identity. The educational effort lies in attempting to get the centre of our being directly in line with the eternal centre of God so that the same circles can be drawn, the same radiation felt from the Still Point. Yet this meeting of centres is always of a centre that has slipped coming back to its original place, of a loss once more finding its whole, and being threatened with loss again and again as it refinds itself.

This middle period of fall and return, symbolized by the *Song of Songs*, must come to an end for Origen. Just as everything began in the One, so too must everything end There. Even Christ, the first seeing of the One as One, will be subjected to God that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15. 28). *As in the beginning, so the end – the end is always like the beginning*. Repetition forwards finally re-collects the Beginning it always was. This is one of the deepest principles of Origen's thought and its consequences are profound. It allows Origen to construct a whole theology about our pre-existence and our resurrection that mirror each other, beginning and ending in the eternal contemplation of the Father by the Son and his bride, and even possibly a remerging of all into the All, so that all that remains in the end is God, beyond all belief. Effectively this raises questions about the

eternity of Hell and universal salvation and restoration (*apokatastasis*), for all must be saved for pre and post to be like each other. Furthermore, even the First seeing of the One as One must finally enter back into the absolute One that exists as the pure singularity of the Abyss, the grounding without ground.<sup>25</sup> Such radical consequences were only half drawn by Origen and often contradicted by other statements, and as we are concerned with the middle phase – our education – these theological developments need not detain us<sup>26</sup>. Suffice it to say that God is such a great teacher that eventually all souls will return to him from their own free will and again exist in the bosom of the Father through the Son. His constructed classroom is of such hue, his pedagogic skill of such subtlety, that even the most fallen will be scaffolded back into the Beginning. Of the three stages of knowledge open to the learning soul – flesh, spirit, and God – Origen gave most of his

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<sup>25</sup> This insight was more tightly drawn by Evagrius (345–399), the great systematizer of Origen’s speculative work. Before the fall, all intellects were in Union with God, so in the end they will return to the intelligible sea, again becoming one with God, with no duality allowed (see McGinn’s excellent discussion in *The Foundations of Mysticism* [1992] 144–157). A modern cosmological resemblance for this vision of *apokatastasis* can be found in the Big Bang theory with the proviso that eventually the universe will stop expanding and turn back into itself and again become the initial singularity that it was.

<sup>26</sup> Greer provides a useful summary of this controversial aspect of Origen’s speculative thought.

[T]he restoration of all things marks the end of Origen’s theological ‘story’. What is certain is that Origen believes that this End will involve not only a return to the perfection of the Beginning, but the winning of a greater perfection from which the rational beings can never fall... Origen does not say that the End is the same as the Beginning. It is *like* the Beginning because the original harmony is restored. But the Restoration is upon a higher level. It is the perfection from which the rational natures can never fall. The stability of the End presumably depends upon the points at which it differs from the Beginning [otherwise we would have a repeat performance of the Fall]. First, the souls have resurrection bodies. While it is not this body that is raised, the soul has a characteristic form that generates the new body of the resurrection. Second, the souls are no longer equal, but are ordered in a hierarchy according to their worth...and...experience they have had on their pilgrimage. And it is that experience which enables them to ply the Word with endless questions and to maintain their interest in his teaching (Greer [1979] 16).

attention to the second level of knowledge, the union of the learning soul with the Word of God. If this was correctly carried out it opened up the potential for exploring a final Union with the One, a point that exists as the final attractor of both Origen's pedagogy and theogony.

### Closing

The education of the learning soul that Origen undertook to assist in his voluminous writings was one that celebrated the ability of the student to reach back up to the heights of God once lost. It is a pedagogy of Light not of Darkness. It celebrated the aptitude of intellect to know the One through the Word. Origen exists as one of the first great teachers of Christianity and his writings guide the education of the learning soul into the higher levels of wisdom by using a divinely inspired reading of scripture. It is a pedagogy that takes the best of the philosophic traditions of the Hellenes and seamlessly blends it into the wisdom of scripture, producing a synthesis of astounding beauty that points to all that was profane becoming sacred again, to all singing one Love Song. Origen writes from the calm water of love nights, no longer caught in the obsession with darkness, a desire for higher love-making sweeping him upwards and pointing us in the same direction.<sup>27</sup> Yes.

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<sup>27</sup> Adapted from Goethe's poem *A Holy Longing* (Washburn and Major [1998] 782).

## Chapter Six: Plotinus<sup>1</sup>

### Opening

And of the great teachers on the non-dual state in the west, Plotinus<sup>2</sup> is the first to take us into the ultimate heights through his collected writings.<sup>3</sup> Parmenides wrote the founding

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<sup>1</sup> Why Plotinus? With Plato, Philo and Origen already providing a fair sampling of Platonic pedagogy in Greek, Jewish and Christian registers, there were powerful reasons to select a pedagogic tale of the heights and depths from an alternative source so as to create a richer picture of the nature of these tales in later Antiquity. One option was *The Chaldean Oracles* (late 200's C.E) with its focus on the growth of mind reaching upwards to God, but it was difficult to use because of its esoteric and cryptic nature. More possible was the *Corpus Hermeticum*, with its rich variety of accounts of the journey of the learning soul towards God after falling into sin. The most applicable text within this tradition to my criteria was the *Asclepius*. A good modern translation of both can be found in Copenhagen's *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation* (1992). A hermetic choice was also encouraged by the possibility of using Giordano Bruno as a representative of how Being revealed itself in Renaissance times, a tale already well told by Yates in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition* (1964). Yet both these collections of texts (The *Oracles* and the *Hermetica*) fed into the more synthetic vision of Plotinus. In one of my favourite phrases – he included and transcended them. Furthermore, Plotinus provides the most complete and exhaustive account of the journey of the learning soul from darkness to light, from duality into the non-dual that exists in late antiquity. He is acknowledged as the most subtle and comprehensive thinker of his age, uniting Plato and Aristotle, Mystery Religion and Philosophy into one coherent whole. When these considerations were combined with his excellence as a teacher and the deep influence of his work on the Christian tradition, especially Augustine, his choice became obvious. In the words of Bertrand Russell, 'Plotinus is both an end and a beginning – an end as regards the Greeks, a beginning as regards Christendom' (Russell [1946] 300).

<sup>2</sup> Plotinus was born at Lycopolis in Egypt in 205 CE and died near Rome sixty-five years later. At the age of 28 he developed an interest in Philosophy, going through many teachers in Alexandria until finding the mysterious Platonist, Saccus, with whom he then studied under for 11 years. In 243 he joined a war expedition against the Persians as a scientific member in the hope of contacting the sages of the east. The expedition failed and Plotinus only just escaped with his life. He did not return to Alexandria, going instead to Rome where he taught for ten years without writing anything. In 253 he began writing what has now been passed down to us as *The Enneads*. We have an account of his life written by one of Plotinus' pupils, Porphyry, on whose shoulders fell the heavy task of editing Plotinus' collected writings. His account is

didactic poem on it, Heraclitus made it change, Zeno caught its paradoxes, Plato described beautiful paths towards it, Jesus lived it, Philo provided us with a colourful travelogue, but it is to Plotinus that we turn for a full philosophical rendering of it. He travelled extensively in the non-dual and showed in his life and writings the effects of these crossings. Lesson after lesson in *The Enneads* takes the learner on a path from his

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usually included in modern editions as a preface to *The Enneads*. From him we hear about Plotinus' lectures, which were open to the public and well attended by prominent members of the community, as well as his writings, which were reserved for an intimate inner circle. Plotinus never gave a formal exposition of his system, preferring to deal with individual problems and questions in a way that illumined the whole. He was always likely to push the discussion into the realm of spiritual practice, using concrete metaphors and then systematically dematerialising them (See VI, 4. 7 and V, 8. 9 for good examples). Plotinus suffered from bad eyesight and did not revise what he had written, preferring to let it all pour out after gaining a clear insight into what it was he wanted to say. He has a remarkable ability to focus, being able to sustain a meditative mindset even in the midst of daily chores and events, and was able to interrupt his writing and then return to it without loss of creativity or concentration. He was an incredibly perceptive man, to the point where students and friends felt that he was psychic. Furthermore, he had great compassion, so much so that his house was filled with orphans given over to his care by senators who felt that the children's interests would be looked after in his holy hands. This compassionate insight extended to his students, not the least of them being Porphyry, whom he counselled out of suicide. All of this and more we find in Porphyry's Introduction, and although it seems hagiographic the sublimity of Plotinus' thought confirms it.

<sup>3</sup> *The Enneads* are divided into six sections containing nine tractates each – a total of fifty-four tractates. Porphyry presented them in systematic, rather than chronological order, attempting to guide the reader through the various levels of Plotinus' system, sometimes breaking up tractates to place them in a more fitting group. This means that each Ennead contains a grouping of Plotinus' work that range from early to late. For example the first nine tractates of the first Ennead occur chronologically as follows – 53, 19, 20, 46, 36, 1, 54, 51, 16. The reader therefore has a choice to either follow Porphyry's ordering or read as Plotinus wrote them. The referencing of *The Enneads* keeps to how Porphyry organized them, but if a bracketed number is included it indicates the chronological sequence. I read them according to Porphyry's schema and found that it worked well, systematically leading me into the depths of Plotinus. There were times, however, especially in the beautiful middle period (starting with *On the Essence of the Soul* (IV[26]. 1) and ending with *On the Kinds of Being* (VI [44]. 3) that I found a more chronological reading paid dividends. The best introduction to his thought is the famous tractate on *Beauty* (I [1]. 6), the first that Plotinus wrote and containing the essence of all that followed, much like acorn to oak.

current state to the deepest levels of learning and then beyond. Precise phenomenological descriptions are provided of the different levels reached to stir the novice on, to educate him about the path to be travelled in this Great Learning. *The Enneads* were written in ‘stream of consciousness’ style, based on questions and answers that came from his actual lessons, without care for spelling and punctuation, intent on capturing the sense rather than worrying about the formalities of style. There is a rigor to *The Enneads*, but it comes from years of travelling the terrain and teaching it to inquiring minds, not from a laborious working through of conceptual implications. Often it is possible to find differing accounts of Plotinus’ main ideas like the Soul, Evil or the Hypostases (real universal principles informing existence), because the context of writing and the problem at hand cause mutations. There have been systematic attempts to fine-tune Plotinus’ vision, most notably that of Proclus,<sup>4</sup> yet these miss the fervour of creation, the spilling over of a vision that does not care for hair splitting argument but pours out in an urgent necessity. Almost every Ennead contains Plotinus’ whole system in holographic form,<sup>5</sup> so that by the time the reader has finished the series, he has journeyed across the whole system numerous times. Plotinus uses whatever is at his disposal to convince the reader

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<sup>4</sup> Proclus (412–85) presided over the sustained victory of Plotinus’ interpretation of Plato in the Academy and provided a systematic account of Neo-Platonism in *Elements of Theology*, a set of 211 propositions, each of which is logically deduced from its antecedent. These propositions were one of the main conduits through which Platonic thought flowed into Medieval times. After his death, the Academy slowly declined until its closure in 529. Neo-Platonism lasted for longer in the Alexandrian school, where Neo-Platonic ideas and texts were still circulating around 641 when Alexandria fell to the Arabs. Neo-Platonism was then to play a major role in the Muslim world. The Neo-Platonists after Plotinus attempted to shore up the ascetic aloneness of Plotinus’ path with a rich mythology and theology, but in the last analysis could not compete with the sheer drama of the Christian story, an example of which we saw in the chapter on Origen. But Proclus’ use of the axiom (taken from Euclid) as his organizing device to make sense of Neo-Platonism was to have an enormous influence on later styles of religious and philosophic writing.

<sup>5</sup> And like a hologram, the fragment always contains the whole, unlike the hologram this is not a fuzzy and vague fragment, but one that is crusted over with the dirt of many transitions and needs to be polished to shine. Dante will use a similar technique within an imaginative mode in his *Comedy*.

to actively begin walking the path rather than stay in a discursive and readerly mode. The writings are encouragements to practice and use metaphors, logic, myth, poetic language, phenomenological description, philosophical reasoning and guided meditations to rouse the reader to the act of contemplation. *The Enneads* are one of the greatest examples in the western tradition of the pedagogic attempt to take a learner from the dual to the non-dual, from body and soul to 'intellect' and spirit, from the dissolution of plurality to the oneness of The Good, from the profane to the sacred, from ignorance to self knowing. It is a way of teaching that is enchanted with life and feels a beautiful goodness streaming through everything that exists. No wonder we turn to the ancient world for a model to reinvigorate our disenchanted world where a hermeneutics of suspicion has deconstructed any enchantment that managed to survive the ugly battering of industrialization and world war. The Hellenes mostly exist for us in a world where everything was enchanted. Homer sees the gods within the everyday,<sup>6</sup> the tragedians reveal the hubris of humanity in the light of the gods, Virgil walks with them through the heights and depths of existence.<sup>7</sup> We cannot take this charm on board wholeheartedly, for it has undergone

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<sup>6</sup> The poets follow us continuously through the footnotes, from the ancient epics of Homer and Virgil, the Christian visions of Dante, Milton and Pope to the modern accounts of Wordsworth, Blake, Yeats, Eliot, Cummings, and Mahon. Consistently, as Philosophy reaches its limit point of self-knowledge it mutates into myth, poetry or other languages of transcendence. We see this from the inception of Philosophy with Parmenides. Even the great Plato finds himself turning to poetic myth when reaching the limit point of knowledge in the Cave metaphor and the luminous road travelled by Love in the *Symposium*. Through the centuries I have found that where philosophy stutters in front of its limits, poetry comes through singing.

<sup>7</sup> It is Virgil who sets up poetically and politically what Plotinus achieves philosophically and individually, as clearly seen by that great Catholic, Von Balthasar (*The Glory of the Lord*: volume 4). Both ancient voices sound through the ages like the universal soul rolling into a still world and giving it life. Virgil asks the great question that puzzles Plotinus and others who believe in a divine soul – 'Why should sublime souls want to return to sluggish bodies? What is this terrible longing for life?' Rome's great father, Aeneas, asks this of his father when looking on a crowd of souls waiting at the waters of Lethe to drink and forget their past lives so that they may enter new bodies. His father replies with a speech that catches many of the themes of Plotinus.

many revisions, alterations and valid critiques, making a difficult fit with modern times, especially as we see the elitist, sexist, and class ridden nature of this Ancient enchantment. Yet the current call for re-enchantment<sup>8</sup> cannot occur without us first remembering what it is to be enchanted, and it is to this 'tower of song' that we work.

With such an achievement as *The Enneads* in front of one it becomes difficult to write adequately. I feel in agony for a true expression that will capture the terrain to be covered in this chapter. There is a double difficulty: capturing the complex beauty of *The Enneads* in a tolerable manner; and writing about the nature of non-duality, something that mostly slips beyond the reach of reasoned writing's capabilities. Both are well known

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To begin with, the heavens, the earth, the cosmos, are infused and activated by a creative mind. This spiritual energy, pure elemental fire, is in all living things; all have a heavenly origin. Particles of this divine nature cling to us throughout life, even though the soul is clogged by the body, in which it is shut as in a dark prison. After death, some ingrained evil remains, which must be purged by punishment through wind, water, and fire. Each of us must undergo our own treatment as spirits, until at last we are sent to Elysium, where in the fullness of time, when the last stain of sin is gone, a few of us becomes ethereal fire. All the rest, after a cycle of a thousand years, are called by the god of Lethe to prepare for rebirth (*Aeneid*, VI, 734–751).

Yet it is not their similarities that make Virgil and Plotinus so crucial to read together, rather it is the manner in which they combine to provide a fuller picture of life. Plotinus tells of the journey of the individual soul through the depths and heights, of how it comes to truth, beauty and love in their essence. Virgil sings the same tale, except his is an account of the social and political dimension of this experience – in the founding of Rome we have the establishment of social and political harmony. Of course the divine Plato was able to hold both of these dimensions together in the *Republic*. Augustine saw the need to hold these two dimensions together as well, hence his *Confessions* must be read in conjunction with the *City of God*. Our focus remains on the individual journey, but this consistently does violence to the integral perspective of the great thinkers we follow, and it must not be forgotten.

<sup>8</sup> Most notably by Prigogine, see his passionate call in *Open the social sciences : report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the restructuring of the Social Sciences*, edited by Wallerstein (1996).

difficulties, but that is no consolation, for others have done this 'impossible' job better than I, but in that thought lies paralysis, so we press on.

### The First Cause

Let us begin with the perpetual question of a child – the Why question – and play it out with a Plotinian mindset. 'Why does this happen, why is it here, how did it come about?'<sup>9</sup> The continuous why of a young mind becomes more urgent as the adult struggles to give increasingly fundamental accounts, until eventually s\he blurts out 'Because **it just is**, okay'. Finally a point is reached where something just does not have an explanation: a first mover that is not moved, a form maker that was not formed or made,<sup>10</sup> a time enterer that is timeless, a founder that was not founded, a principle that itself does not have principles (VI, 8. 11). An end point is reached where the idea of a beginning loses hold, for if it began then what was before it, if it just started, what did it start from? What is a place without a start like?<sup>11</sup> Plotinus was a master at playing this why game, but his true

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<sup>9</sup> 'Where, then? Where exists the author of this beauty and life?... You see the splendour over all the manifold Forms or Ideas; well might we linger here: but amid all these things of beauty we cannot but ask whence they come and whence the beauty. This source can be none of the beautiful objects; were it so, it too would be mere part. It can be no shape, no power, nor the total of powers and shapes that have had the becoming that has set them here; it must stand above all the powers, all the patterns. The origin of all this must be formless – formless not as lacking shape but as the very source of even shape Intellectual' (VI, 7. 32). Even clearer 'Bring something under Form and present it so before the mind; immediately we ask what Beyond imposed that shape... The Beyond Beauty cannot have admitted shape or be an Idea: the Primal Beauty, The First, must be without Form' (VI, 7. 33).

<sup>10</sup> '[We] must not speak of him as made but sheerly as maker...; when He acted He was not in some state that could be described as 'before existing'. He was already existing entirely... If there had been a moment from which He began to be, it would be possible to assert his self-making in the literal sense; but since what He is He is from before all time, his self making is to be understood as simultaneous with himself; the being is one and the same with the making, the eternal 'bringing into existence' (VI, 8. 20).

genius lay in explaining what the 'just is' is. In answering this child like question as carefully and rigorously as possible he broke through the limiting barriers of Form and Being and found a whole new world beyond Being open out for exploration. In entering this new world, exploring it himself, and coming back to tell his own students about it, he went beyond the realm of genius and became a fountainhead for all serious learners who wished to open themselves to the radical impact and consequences of the why question, to learners who wanted to enter, and participate in, the realm of the 'just is because it is', the realm beyond why.<sup>12</sup>

The great mystery of the question lies in how something that is beyond cause, time, space and form generated this world of cause and effect, of birth and death, of interval and interruption, of shape and size. How did the world of the 'just is' enter the world of the 'is because'. If it was without cause, then where did causes come from? If it was before time, then where did time come from?... and so on. The mystery further deepens when we consider the implication that if the World without why is before time and space, infinite and eternal, and it produced This World of time and space, then this world, apparently so real and concrete, is really of a second order, an order that fades and dies. The other World is one of true Being, for it always was, this world is only an arising and fading from it. So we have an Appearance-Reality split, with our experienced world actually being only a reflection of a truer and more stable World that exists as the generator of this one.

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<sup>11</sup> 'The First must be without form, and if without form, then it is no Being; Being must have some definition and therefore be limited; but the First cannot be thought of as having definition or limit, for thus it would be not the Source but the particular item indicated by the definition...It therefore transcends Being' (V, 5. 6).

<sup>12</sup> Neo-Platonism was the filter through which most readers came back to Antiquity, often without realizing it. As Lovejoy notes – 'without going back to Alexandrian Neo-Platonism little in subsequent European metaphysics can be understood in its proper historical setting' (*The Dialectic of Bruno and Spinoza*, quoted by Kerrigan and Braden [1989] 104).

On this issue of the eternal existence of Form many of the Ancient Greeks took the Forms to be timeless and unchanging, not asking the question of what made the Forms form. They stopped the question there and said, 'the Forms are just because they are', maybe ending with One Form that simply was and produced the others. Plotinus' major question was 'what then produced the Form?' For most of the ancient Greeks and Romans this was just one too many of the Why questions. The Forms just were for them, there eternally, unchanging and productive of everything else around us. Nothing could come from nothing (there is no zero in their mathematics), so the Forms must have always been present, giving order to a dark, Dionysian universe that had also always been there, Form on the Formless, Olympian over the Dionysian. To gain the highest level of reality was to contemplate these Forms that lay behind this world of becoming, to contemplate those things that put order into things but did not have to explain how they themselves were ordered, for they had always been stably perfect. The Forms are just because they are, they produce other things, they were not produced themselves, they are purely what they are, existing in a timeless, unchanging world of perfection. Disputes could occur over the nature of these Forms, their basic natures and constituents, but the issue of their generation by something prior seemed foolish to ask about.

Plotinus was unhappy with this answer, formulated in Plato's middle period. He was also uncomfortable with Aristotle's refinements in the concept of Intellect (see the whole of *V, 6 That the Principle transcending Being has no Intellectual Act*). Plotinus felt that one more Why question could be asked – why are there Forms, what is beyond Intellect, what is behind the unmoved mover of pure mind? Yet this beyond would have to be something radically strange, it would have to be a formless something that existed before any form had given it any imprint, something that caused forms to form, and as such therefore before and beyond Form. But that would make it formless and therefore beyond our comprehension, for our comprehension works by giving form to things. How then do we understand something before form, when our very understanding works by giving form? How do we name this when the very name gives it a form, even if it is the name

‘formless’?<sup>13</sup> This is one of the routes that the ultimate why question takes us along and it is one that Plotinus travelled to the end: we reach the Formless, Timeless, Causeless One that just was before everything else and caused it to be. There can be no other answer for Plotinus, for it is only here that the Why question reaches its end point. We can summarize it like this – ‘Why is this natural world here?’ ‘Because it was made by the outpouring of a world creating energy, a Universal Soul.’ ‘Where did this Universal Soul come from?’ ‘It resulted from an outpouring energy that desired to make material the vision of a Divine Mind.’ ‘Where did this Divine Mind come from?’ ‘From the first seeing of that which was before Mind, Soul and body – the One.’ ‘Where did That come from?’ ‘It just is, okay, before everything!’

### **Emanation and Return**

We notice in this imaginary and simplified dialogue that two features are required of this One: it is the origin of everything – but does not have an origin itself; it is the cause of everything – but is itself not caused; it is responsible for this world of becoming – but is itself before becoming; it accounts for this world of particularity and variety – but is before all particularities and variety. Plotinus used two famous images to capture this dynamic. Firstly an endless source to a stream that stays the same inside yet overflows its banks, always keeping its fullness and simplicity while spilling over into other things, fertilizing and creating as it flows outwards into many things.<sup>14</sup> The second image is

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<sup>13</sup> ‘[W]e are talking of the untellable; we name, only to indicate for our own use as best we may. And this name, the One, contains really no more than the negation of plurality...If we are led to think positively of the One, name and thing, there would be more truth in silence: the designation, a mere aid to enquiry, was never intended for more than a preliminary affirmation of absolute simplicity to be followed by the rejection of even that statement’ (V, 5. 6).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Imagine a spring that has no source outside itself; it gives itself to all the rivers, yet is never exhausted by what they take, but remains always integrally as it was; the tides that proceed from it are at one within it before they run their several ways, yet all, in some sense, know before hand down what channels they will pour their streams’ (III, 8. 10).

that of light coming from the sun while the sun remains unchanging and self-sufficient.<sup>15</sup> I would like to work with both of these (and others) as we develop an extended image of Plotinus' system. These metaphors provides us with a way of visualizing the first basic rule of Plotinian thought – that a self contained entity, unfaltering and pure, contemplating only itself can produce outward effects while remaining itself unchanged, like the eternal sun and the light it radiates. This is the principle of *emanation*, that all 'existences, as long as they retain their character, produce – about themselves, from their essence, in virtue of the power which must be in them – some necessary, outward-facing hypostases continuously attached to them and representing in image the engendering archetypes' (V, 1. 6). The principle of emanation is a recursive operation, continually repeating itself downwards, producing a mirrored world of images, increasingly imprecise as we get images of images, and then images of an image of an image, until finally darkness and the imageless is reached, where all that is reflected on the last mirror is absolute vagueness. Nothing. In the emanation, the progeny is always a junior, something less than its parent,<sup>16</sup> but as perfect as an offspring can be, like inbred royalty. The emanation from the One produces an image of itself, an image that is as perfect as a first image can be. This would be a first seeing, a pure seeing of light turning around and seeing light, a seeing of itself as itself, the formation of God's Mind (to use a Christian concept). This process would continue downwards with Intellect producing a universal energy of out flowing creativity (Universal Soul) that in turn produces the rich material world of our everyday existence.

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<sup>15</sup> V, 1. 6; V, 3. 12; V, 4. 1. For a discussion of how to dematerialise the image see VI, 4. 7.

<sup>16</sup> For Plotinus, everything that reaches out is less for it, it diffuses its energy, just as heat becomes less hot as it leaves the centre. It is in an inner directed contemplation that something is at its most powerful and it is from this self sustaining heat that diffusion is possible. Put as a rule, every prime cause must be, within itself, more powerful than its effect can be (V, 8. 1). I suspect that Plotinus would have enjoyed working with many of our modern cosmological concepts – like the Big Bang and Black Holes – even though he would find the above rule seriously questioned today.

This brings us to the second great principle operating in Plotinus' work – that of *return*.<sup>17</sup> It works on the idea that the offspring has within itself the desire to seek out and love its parent, and that it will do all it can to turn around and return to its source through contemplating that which made it and is more complete and perfect than it. An image desires to become its original as it lacks the fuller goodness of that above it. In the process of turning around it forms itself as something different from its creator, coalescing as something altered in the attempt to return to it. Because it is both less than the source and different to it, the attempt to return produces an image that is always a reduction and an addition. Before it turns, it is an ecstatic outpouring that is almost blind. Plotinus uses the language of life and love to catch this outpouring, and anyone who has felt the warm touch of pure love in their beloved's eyes knows what is being talked about here. It is a streaming forth that does not know itself in a reflective way because it has not turned to see itself yet, it is the outpouring wave of the spring that only knows itself in the turning back. The very desire to contemplate its source makes it suddenly take on a boundary.

The turning around to see has effects that radically shape the outpouring. It does not stop the gushing out. As it turns towards its creator, the outpouring continues, breaking up the return, fragmenting and disrupting it, forcing the backward glance to break up as it faces the flood. The returning vision cannot fully capture and take in what it sees, but nevertheless it tries to fully capture what its source was like, elaborating a model of it that catches it in as perfect a likeness as possible (V, 3. 11; V, 4. 2; VI, 7. 15). As this contemplative vision reaches its own completeness, it too begins to emanate outwards as something different to its own source, producing an outpouring that will, in turn, also want to rush back to its creator and thus form itself as something different and less. A key

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<sup>17</sup> Everything turns to its prior as what is its good. 'To the lowest of things the good is its immediate higher; each step represents the good to what stands lower so long as the movement does not tend away but advances continuously towards the superior: thus there is a halt at the Ultimate, beyond which no ascent is possible' (VI, 7. 25).

point over here is that procession happens without the source being affected by its progeny.<sup>18</sup> It is like a one-way mirror, where although the image goes outwards and can be seen on the other side, the creative force only 'sees' its own world, not what is happening on the other side.<sup>19</sup> Of this it is oblivious and unaffected, although the other side sees it through the glass (if darkly), scents it (if faintly), feels it (if softly). So, looked at from the top down, the system works with one-way mirrors that allow an image through but reflect back to itself only an image of itself. Looked at from the bottom up, it is possible to see images on the other side, but these get fainter and more obscure as the levels proliferate. What is above remains unaffected by what is below, although it produced it. What is below longs to return to what is above, but finds itself altered in the desire and has to craft a model of what it contemplates in the glass, elaborating on it until

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<sup>18</sup> 'This Being is limitless and that in all the outflow from it there is no lessening, either in its emanation, since this also it the entire universe, nor in itself, the starting point, since it is no assemblage of parts to be diminished by any outgo' (III, 8. 8. See also III, 8. 10). As a rule one can state that there is no effacement of a prior in its secondary (V, 2. 1).

<sup>19</sup> Each level only knows itself, not its consequents. At its most radical this means that the One, before it turns to see itself as Divine Mind, exists in a state before reflection and beyond contemplation, for the first act of contemplation is that of the One seeing itself and thus forming a Divine Intellect. What it is like *before any reflection occurs* is what Plotinus pursues continuously in *The Enneads*. As he puts it 'It follows that the Supreme will know neither itself nor anything else but will hold an august repose. All the rest is later; before them all, This was what This was; any awareness of that other would be acquired, the shifting knowledge of the unstable. Even in knowing the stable he would be manifold...' (VI, 7. 39). The Intellectual-Principle and the World Soul know not their consequents either, only the principles within their own realm. These principles in-form the lower because the lower is an image of these principles. This enables Plotinus to retain the purity of each level, for if the Divine levels knew the 'evil' of matter below them in any way it would corrupt them. Thus the hypostases do not see their consequents, only their priors, and this enables the whole system to work upwards without the need for a divine intervention to save any from Evil. We are all already divine. There is no chasm from the lower to the higher, only from the higher to the lower. The higher knows nothing of its subsequents, nor does it need to, much like an original does not need a copy, but a copy needs an original. A copy does not affect the original yet comes out of it and strives to be like it, so it is with the various levels of Plotinus' system.

it perfects an imitation and thus produces a new emanation.<sup>20</sup> This whole process of procession, return and copying until a full image is produced recurs until the energy of the system finally runs out.<sup>21</sup> At this point the system fully reverses direction and begins to return to its source, much like a salmon returning to its breeding ground, the mirrors becoming more like rapids that have to be jumped, ever upwards, using the gush that brought one down into materiality to leap upwards. Later we will explore what the human options are within this system, but for now let us note the formal possibilities that exist at each level below the First (the One) and above the Last (pure matter). These are to return upwards, proceed downwards or elaborate on the level one is in. Thus it is possible to go briefly upwards and then sink down again, or go upwards and then elaborate on the new level one finds oneself in, or just keep on going upwards until one gets to the One. These options allow a complete traversing of the system from top to bottom, so long as one does not fully lose form in death. It provides us with a formal model that allows for the great imaginative visions of this system in Virgil, Dante, Milton and Blake, who travel across

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<sup>20</sup> Creation derives from an act of contemplation that never becomes anything else, and never does anything else but contemplate, creating simply by an outflow happening from the unaffected contemplation. Plotinus makes Nature speak of this state as follows – ‘[W]hatsoever comes into being is my vision, seen in my silence, the vision that belongs to my character who, sprung from vision, am vision – loving and create vision by the vision-seeing faculty within me...I gaze and the figures of the material world take being as if they fell from my contemplation. As with my mother (the All-Soul) and the Beings that begot me so it is with me: they are born of a contemplation and my birth is from them, not by their Act but by their Being; they are the loftier Reason-Principles, they contemplate themselves and I am born’ (III,8.4).

<sup>21</sup> At this stage the emanation has poured out completely, filling all possible heights and depths out to the fullest capacity. In Plotinus we find its classical expression. Plenitude is an eternal process that consists of an outpouring of Reality from The Good, continuing until all possibilities have been filled, even the most imperfect ones, for the universe needs all things to be complete, perfect and beautiful. This is a necessary outpouring that continues all the way down. Within this outpouring into multiplicity, that which turns back suddenly takes form at whatever level it is that the turning back began, at the level of matter, soul or intellect. The reason for this outpouring lies in the self-sufficient One not begrudging the rest of existence its fullness, as Plato so famously put it in the *Timaeus* (29E–30A).

the boundaries, visiting the depths of hell and the heights of heaven, forming a western canon that still breathes today, even though it is in a Heart of Darkness.

With the mechanics of the system in place, I would like to fill it out with an extended image that works from the One all the way down to Matter and then swims back up again to the Source. We already have a useful start in the metaphor of the sun radiating light, and so long as we dematerialise the sun out of space and time, making the pure source of light beyond time, space and change, we have a good picture of the first two levels. The first level can be called the One and exists before all else in self sufficiency, not having any cause because it is the Cause without having Cause, not having Form, because it is what makes Form happen without having Form, containing everything in a radical simplicity that is pure and eternal. From this perfect goodness radiates energy of white light that streams out as a life giving force of primal strength. It streams out in joyful abandon, unaware of itself because it is pure emanation without any reflection to catch itself in (V, 3. 11; VI, 7.16).

As emanation it is already something beyond the self-sufficient One and it feels a longing to return to its magnificent origin, so it turns around, immediately forming a boundary that acts as a one-way mirror. In the return it is unable to hold the full force of the emanation and is forced to break it up into manageable parts, trying to catch what it sees above it, but only able to reproduce a copy of it. It is like pure white light suddenly fragmenting and producing the full, indivisible spectrum, still light but suddenly multihued. The desire to fully capture what it sees above leads to a soundless elaboration of pure colour until the most perfect image possible has been created. This is the Mind of God, the Intellectual-Principle, containing pure thought, recognizing itself as One, being the One, but in this recognition already containing the most subtle of dualities, for it is something that *turned back and recognised itself* (V, 3. 10 and 11). It is a spectrum of light recognizing itself as white light and longing for its source. As a fragmented unity we can picture it as the heavens above us on a clear night – millions of lights silently contemplating the One Light that gave them life. For Plotinus the night sky revealed the

radiance of the divine, so close to us, just above the heavens, silently turning in worship of The Good, reflecting the godly light down to us. The One is close to us, it fills the sky with its glory, the world with its images, our souls with its light. Everything basks in the Glory of the One, all is a reflection of the Same, of the The.

Unbeknown to it, this radiant spectrum has now produced its own emanation below, a different world that can see through the glass backwards, a breathing outwards. Let us call this a world of air in terms of our image, but in terms of the Hypostases it is the Universal Soul. The air is illuminated by the light that is still flooding through from the level above, but different from it, producing its own world in contemplation of the colourful light it sees streaming through the glass. It sees the beautiful Mind of God and wishes to become like it, desiring to create a perfect copy of the Forms in the Mind and so it creates a world, perfect in every way that embodies the Mind of God in a world of Universal Soul. It is air filled with light – the beautiful rainbow of Juno and her helper, Iris – millions of separate particles open to each other and humming with colour. Finally, after it too elaborates the most perfect image possible of the whole spectrum, it produces a one-way mirror that allows an emanation outwards while the world of air remains unaffected. The heavens rain down and produce a world of water (for Plotinus the world of Matter).

Water allows the soul-forms in the air above to see themselves reflected on its surface, but does not give them the ability to see into its depths. This feeling is sometimes captured when flying over water with the sun shining onto it. The water does not look blue but takes on a silvery brightness that reflects upwards and on it you see a beautiful shadow that is yourself imaged. It looks like the pure light of the sun, but is actually the empty formlessness of water. The water is not only a surface, it continues down into the depths where finally nothing can survive in its empty, dark coldness. It is a vacant, bland formlessness that allows form to be stamped onto it from above, for life to be breathed into it, taking on the colour and airs of life thereby, but always being only death wakened for a while. For Plotinus, our souls are made up of the levels of ‘air’ and ‘light’, an

illuminated, colourful breath that contains all above it in a single gulp. As souls we exist above the waters as perfect forms that are open to all life and goodness, just as air contains molecules that are separate but do not obscure vision or light, allowing it to stream through in a warm, receptive glow. It is at this point that we come to a third image that extends the metaphor.

The souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysus as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme: yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the divine Intellect; it is not that they have come bringing the Intellectual-Principle down in their fall; it is that though they have descended . . . , yet their higher part holds for ever above the heavens (IV, 3. 12).

Individual souls are enchanted by their images in the mirrored water below and dive down towards them, suddenly finding themselves entering another sphere, that of water, and becoming separate light-filled bubbles. Out of the blue, the non-dual singularity finds itself surrounded by water, now fully separate from other existences, obscurely seeing through the distorted lens of its own curvature and the thickness of matter surrounding it. It is not light returning to light, or clear air being illuminated by light, now it is a breath of illuminated air caught in separateness, seeing darkly. As human beings, for Plotinus, we are located here, between the pure source and the final lack, between spirit and matter, absolute creativity and radical emptiness, light and darkness, good and evil. We have plunged into Pandora's Box, into the dark voice of the sea. It is a different world from how it appeared above. One might have thought of sight, but not of the ill it sees, thought of speech, but not the dark italics that it surrounds, thought of its world but not of the overwhelmingly sensuous waters that would come with the dive.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The last sentence is adapted from Wallace Stevens' poem 'Esthetique' in his *Collected poems* (1945). It is in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs de mal* that we find a modern expression of a sensitivity caught in this overarching dynamic between descent into dark emptiness and rising into transcendence.

As beings that can travel up and down the system because we are made up of light and air in water, we have specific choices and alternatives: most obviously, we can decide to stay on the level that formed us as self-willed and owned; sink even lower into materiality; or return to our purer parts above. A part of us is always going to sink down into empty formlessness, for our bodies are destined to die and disintegrate. There is also a middle part to us, the diver, swimming in a world unlike its own, trying to survive. It is a different world, this underwater world of 'hubble bubble toil and trouble'. Existence is short and fragile, life is dangerous and brutish, the threat of disappointment and suffering awaits. It will seem that time is running out. Indeed the life force given to the material world by the dive in of the soul is limited, a specific time of beginning and ending arises, where finally, a last breath will be given that ends the existence underwater and again air and light rise to the surface.

The individual soul finds itself at the meeting point of these two great worlds, it exists above as a pure soul, its highest part being totally at one with light, but in the plunge downward it takes on a bodily form, and in the process finds itself as mixture of body, soul and spirit. Its task becomes not only to navigate and control this strange and demanding body, but to listen to the natural tendency of its highest part to rise again to the surface.<sup>23</sup> To do this it must firstly learn to quiet and control the body and its desires through using that part of the soul in contact with the boundary to discipline the body. Once this is achieved, the purer part of the soul in the centre of the bubble, not in contact with the edges, can realize its true nature as belonging to a world above and so begin the

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<sup>23</sup> This is caught by Conrad in *The Nigger on the Narcissus*, where he describes the beginning of the ship's journey – 'The passage had begun... Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier. A great circular solitude moved with her, ever changing and ever the same, always monotonous and always imposing... The sun looked upon her all day, and every morning rose with a burning, round stare of undying curiosity... The august loneliness of her path lent dignity to the sordid inspiration of her pilgrimage' (*A Conrad Argosy* [1942] 97). With Conrad, as with Homer, the journey is going to be tougher and richer than Plotinus lets on. The storm encountered off the Cape coast and the near sinking of the *Narcissus* capture this in a way that can only be called Art.

upward journey. There is always a tendency to rise again to the surface and if these separate 'beings' were to turn inwards, not look at the exterior and the attractive images floating around, it would see that it is actually illumined air. In this contemplation of itself it would gain the power to rise fully to the surface. If not it will exist in an underwater world of rapidly dwindling life reserves. Attempts to merge with other divers will only generate temporary relief as they are also fading. A lack will not find satisfaction in another lack. Surfacing is where we must go.

Imagine the undiluted pleasure of a 'fading' breath of air suddenly surfacing. To breathe freely, to break through into a world of air where oxygen is not rationed, where it is not dwindling – such would be the dream of these divers if they knew about the source, if they knew they were underwater. If they comprehended, they would swim upwards, gaining strength from each diver above them, getting more and more oxygen from each level nearer the surface, until – if persistent and lightened from all that is below – they were able to break through and gulp unadulterated air for the first time, before sinking below again. And perhaps, after many such gulps, they may learn how to stay afloat without sinking, learn how to breathe fresh air even though their bodies are submerged, learn how to swim and look around this new world that always is and from which they have always breathed, no matter how 'third mouthed'. They would break open into a beautiful expanse, a blue, endless sky full of what it was they most needed and desired, yet now it would not be an effort, now breathing would come naturally, without struggle or desperation, now breathing would happen without thinking, it would become easy and natural.<sup>24</sup> They would still be in water, but would learn to float in it with head turned upwards, feeling the warm sun on their faces,<sup>25</sup> their bodies light, the water only a

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<sup>24</sup> It will be like a recognition that we have been sick instead of healthy, and after becoming healthy again, it will be a natural state, something we do not feel but only recognise when we get sick again (V, 8. 11).

<sup>25</sup> Unlike poor Clytie, who watches Apollo's daily journey across the sky with unrequited love, the learning soul is assured of attaining the heights of Light for Plotinus, if she only practices assiduously, as it is already within her.

support, their breath mixing with the heavens. Then would they understand why bubbles of air always floated upwards, why the breath in them, no matter how weak, made their heavy body buoyant and capable of rising. They would know that the wide expanse of blue above was far more beautiful, more good, more true than the blue waters below, for the one gave life while the other was lifeless, the one was warm, the other cold, the one was what all life rose to, the other what all death sank into. The one provided visions of light and touches of truth, goodness and beauty, the other a narcosis of phantoms that seduced into suffering and death. But even in these spectre filled depths, even at the lowest levels, a bubble of air let out in death or desperate living rises to the surface and breaks through to the vastness. Such would the world become, a great breathing outwards from a vastness that finally reaches a bottom before returning to itself.<sup>26</sup>

A combination of four options would effectively face a being that had broken into the opening, into the lighting:

- He could sink back down after taking a breath – in which case other options open out: to live with more vigour (often its more like depression<sup>27</sup>) for a time underwater; plunge deeper into the depths; or follow a path of discipline and purification to attempt a resurfacing.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> '[T]he outgoing process could not end with the souls...: every Kind must produce its next; it must unfold from some concentrated central principle as from a seed, and so advance to its term in the varied forms of sense. The prior in its being will remain unalterably in the native seat; but there is the lower phase, begotten to it by an ineffable faculty of its being, native to soul as it exists in the Supreme. To this power we cannot impute any halt, any limit of jealous grudging; it must move for ever outward until the universe stands accomplished to the ultimate possibility. All, thus, is produced by an inexhaustible power giving its gift to the universe, no part of which it can endure to see without some share of its being' (IV, 8. 6).

<sup>27</sup> To catch a glimpse of the gods is dangerous if one is not ready, as Actaeon found out when he spied the naked Diana and was transformed into a stag chased down by his own hunting dogs.

- He could follow this new world's understanding of itself and track its own reflection of itself – the path of contemplation;
- He could settle on the surface and swim around for a while, exploring this new world in all its complexity and fullness – the path of elaboration.<sup>29</sup> This is a path of the extension of contemplation on the same level, a travelling up and down the level without breaking through to the next level, a finding out and a living according to the way the new world works, a stabilization within the clearing.
- He could be lifted up by the downward outpouring of light onto the next level, into the source – the path of ecstatic love. One way to picture this in terms of the metaphor is to imagine the illumined air once it surfaces being heated by the outpouring rays of the sun and lifting up as a droplet into the heavens. Here again it will face the four options: either falling as rain; contemplation of the rainbow (of which it is a part); elaborating and exploring the world for a while; or travelling ever upwards into the light until water and air burn away and all that is left is light returning to Light.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is a key point, for many travel this path upwards and then prefer to sink back down and live in the wonderfully rich everyday world rather than continue the ascetic push upwards, or find that this world insists that they stay. Derek Mahon articulates this position beautifully in his poem *The Last of the Fire Kings* in which he describes the five years spent ascending the heights and 'perfecting my cold dream \ of a place out of time, \ a palace of porcelain \ where the frugivorous \ inheritors recline \ in their rich fabrics \ far from the sea. \ But the fire-loving \ people, rightly perhaps, \ will not countenance this, \ demanding that I inhabit, \ like them, a world of \ sirens, bin-lids \ and bricked up windows – \ not to release them \ from the ancient curse \ but to die their creature and be thankful' (Mahon [2000] 35).

<sup>29</sup> This is the path of Pygmalion, who faithfully made statues in the image of the gods until he fell in love with one of them and prayed that it may live. When embracing it one day it took warmth from him and came alive. So it was that Pygmalion made and then married Galatea.

<sup>30</sup> The downward surge of love and its lifting one upwards is delightfully captured in the myth of Diana falling in love with the young shepherd, Endymion, visiting him at night while he slept on the hills and kissing him in her moonlight. Such was her love that she lifted him up in an eternal sleep and carried him to Mount Latmus, where he slept forever in the bliss of her soft light.

This is the vision of Plotinus put in metaphorical form, stitching his various analogies and metaphors together into a comprehensive image. It is a radiant one with the clearest educational and pedagogical goals. Plotinus was faced with the attempt to teach the absolute heights and depths of human experience to his students and encourage them to walk the path themselves. It was not enough for education to stay on the level of elaborating the shadowy depths of the underwater world, discovering, identifying, and classifying various separate existences and the regions they occupy. The task of the teacher was to introduce his students to a fuller world that contained more beauty, truth, goodness, life and love than the world his charges were fragmented and drowning in.

His educational program seems very similar to that of Philo's Abram and Origen's bride, except a further level of development has been added with much more phenomenological description. Plotinus wished to stir up the souls of his students through the intellectual beauty, clarity and comprehensiveness of his vision as well as provide them with careful descriptions of what happened at various levels of the journey so that they could practice correctly. It is a phenomenological education in fore-structuring. As we are focusing on the educational implications of such a vision, it is best to follow the path upwards and inwards of the learner returning to his source in the One, rather than attempt a philosophical account of how Plotinus derived the hypostasis and the principles from the top down. Let us look to his phenomenological account of what happens to a learner as he traverses the system, placing our emphasis on the pedagogy necessary to lay ourselves, and our learners, on the path towards the Beautiful, the True and The Good.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> I have tried to write these next pages in a way that catches a learning soul 'bobbing up and down' as it suddenly glimpses a new level and then sinks down again, only to rise again and stabilize at this new level, before again glimpsing that above it and repeating the process. Please forgive the repetitiveness this involves.

### From the alone to the Alone

The journey of the learning soul has two key interrelating elements: It is a path of the alone to the Alone;<sup>32</sup> and it is an upward journey that is simultaneously inward. It may begin the journey by noting the beautiful world and Kosmos, but this will quickly lead to searching for the opening within that is allowing the awareness. No one can travel the path but the learning soul itself. It is not a communal journey that can rely on others to help but a retiring crossing from the outside to the inside; from action to contemplation; from listening, learning and discussing to a unique encounter with one's own centre; from explanation and guidance to desolate introspection; a passing of the solitary to the Solitary. It is an inward turning that has a chequered history in the west, ranging from the imposing Monastics and the way of prayer to the grand disciplines of Cartesian meditation, Psycho-analysis and Phenomenology.<sup>33</sup> True education for Plotinus consisted of turning a student's attention away from the many happenings outside to the one event always happening inside, to the clearing, the opening, the lighting within. As such it is not an education for the industrious masses but for the ascetic few who are prepared to completely cut ties with the world and its busyness. This tension alone makes the Plotinian way questionable in our democratic world, yet another educational

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<sup>32</sup> Virgil captured the tragic consequences of the Divine calling in the suicide of Dido (*Aeneid*, IV). Personal love mostly cannot survive the journey to the Divine or a Divine calling, and Aeneas has to leave Dido to continue his mission, pushing her to suicide as she cannot face a return into the politicking of the everyday, preferring the endless world of death after experiencing the timeless world of love. The Roman Hero may experience the timeless in the arms of Dido or the underworld of Hades, but he always continues the journey back into the everyday, where his true calling lies – one of establishing a divine dispensation on earth – *Pax Romana*. Plotinus can offer us no such equivalent to the human tragedy that comes from the intersection of the earthly and the divine.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault recognised the importance of this inward turn only later in his career, pointing out that the discipline of the self on self was a vital element mislaid in his archaeologies and genealogies. It is a missing heritage in the modern episteme that is becoming increasingly apparent and is being rapidly refilled (this effort being a part of the movement).

contradiction lies at the heart of this credo 'from the alone to the Alone'. The One does not care if a student attempts a return to It. It is self-sufficient, magnificent in its aloneness, unaffected by all journeying towards It. Unlike the Christian mythos that encourages the traveller with tales of joyous and loving greetings by the Father – a Father who cares enough to sacrifice his Son and knows how many hairs you have on your head – here we have a return to a Self Sufficiency that always is just as it is whether you attempt the journey or not, whether you are Nazi or Jew, Agnostic or Saint, you are all surf of the One. It just is and always will be no matter what actions are done in this world. There is no I–Thou relationship. On one level this stance is profoundly nihilistic for it places all that happens in this world on the same level. The Ultimate Good is radically unaffected by whatever happens in the world of appearances, in the world of coming and going. Augustus, Napoleon, Hitler came and went in waves, the One stays. They only cross an ocean that remains. Nor is there an apparatus of hell and grace to push the learner on with sticks and carrots into new zones of development. There is only an encouragement that if one follows the Plotinian path one will reach something that One always already was (so why do it), or stay as you are (and already be that other One anyway, even if you do not know it). We will see later on that the story is not so simple and that the Neo-Platonic tradition found a vital home for itself in the Christian tradition with Augustine, but that is the next chapter.

Let us follow the upward-inward path with Plotinus. We know from his system that when we break through to a new level inside of us, a number of options open out – sinking down again, contemplation, elaboration and ecstatic love. If we follow the learning soul upwards we see that it has at least four terrains it can work within: that of the Material world; the world of Soul; of Intellect; and the One. Furthermore, we notice that these four terrains exist whether the learning soul traverses them or not. Secondly we observe that as we go up the levels they become more inclusive and generative. Matter is generated by Soul which is generated by Intellect which is generated by the One, with the One having generated Intellect which generates Soul which generates Matter which generates nothing, only takes on form. Thirdly we recognise that different learners choose to go

through these levels in very different ways. A lover chooses an individual form and follows its beauty where it leads him, a musician the harmony of forms, a philosopher the beauty of intellectual forms.<sup>34</sup> There are many different ways of treading through the Plotinian arrangement, many waves flowing through the fundamental emanation and return. Fourthly, a whole range of elements alter as we travel through the system: our cognition; morality and virtue,<sup>35</sup> will; emotions and desires,<sup>36</sup> needs; self identity and self

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<sup>34</sup> In I, 3 (*Dialectic*) Plotinus distinguishes between three types of temperament that reach towards The Good – the lover, the musician and the philosopher. Depending on the type so the starting point and the route towards the One changes, although the levels travelled through and the end goal remain the same. For example, when working with a musical temperament the ‘natural tendency must be made the starting point to such a man; he must be drawn by the tone, rhythm, and design in things of sense; he must learn to distinguish the material forms from the Authentic Existent which is the source of all these correspondences and of the entire reasoned scheme in the work of art: ...he must be shown that what ravished him was no other than the Harmony of the Intellectual world and the Beauty in that sphere, not some one shape of beauty but the All-Beauty.’ So too with the lover who must not fall down in front of the beauty of one person in bewildered delight but, following the *Symposium*, go to the beauty of a noble life, a social system, the arts and sciences until he too reaches the one principle behind the beauty of the many. The philosopher must use the method of Dialectics, a process of ‘seeing’ beyond mathematics, for mathematics still works with defined axioms and Dialectics is a directness of sense perception without assumptions that sees the world as it is, before deductions are made about it. The difficulty of remaining in love with one beautiful person when pursuing the divine is a major tension that runs throughout this ascetic flight upwards. It is only with Beatrice that we find an exemplar within the Platonic tradition of individual love being held in unison with divine love.

<sup>35</sup> As a soul travels through the different levels its approach to virtue changes. On the level of soul controlling body the civic virtues of prudence, fortitude, moral balance and rectitude are principles that bring order and beauty to our lives here, setting bounds to our desires and making our judgements clear. But as we move on to the level of pure soul, then prudence changes to a state of Intellection where the soul contemplates itself; fortitude becomes the courage to not fear the separation of body from soul; and moral balance becomes the ability to not allow the body to affect contemplation. The civic virtues become virtues of purification. These change yet again as we go up a level into pure intellect where thought and act, seer and seen become one. All of this is clearly explicated in tractate 1. 2 – *The Virtues*.

mastery;<sup>37</sup> ideas of The Good; space and time perception;<sup>38</sup> perception of causality; attitude towards death and pain;<sup>39</sup> and memory to name a few. A learning soul, on a returning mission through the emanation, has to juggle all of this and find his own unique path. Not only must he trek through whole levels, but do so in a way that takes into account all the various modalities that alter as he does so: negotiating the dangers of sinking down again with the danger of ascending too quickly; the need to distance oneself from previous predispositions while encountering whole new forces inside; the individual pull of idiosyncrasy channelled into a unique path of transcendence; the need to focus on one route rather than running from path to path without going anywhere. All of this has to be taken into account, and it is Plotinus who provides the first full philosophical\pedagogic rendition of how to do so. Thus it is possible for different travellers to have completely different experiences as they enter the new level. A break

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<sup>36</sup> Given the three fold nature of the human being produced by the plunge downwards he can either: embrace dissolution and be gripped by need and pain; control and discipline the body with the 'conjoint' and be a disciplined, controlled and virtuous man; or become purely that soul that sees and enter a non-dual world beyond virtue, desire and distress, for the act is pure act and is thus beyond the discipline and control needed to be virtuous – it just is (see IV, 8. 2 for a brilliant discussion of this).

<sup>37</sup> When we speak of self mastery then we have a dual state. A non-dual state would mean that self mastery disappears and is replaced by pure act. See the excellent discussion of this in VI, 8 *On Free Will*.

<sup>38</sup> In discussing how the heavenly bodies (stars) move and experience time and space, Plotinus attempted to catch what it is like to be in a non-dual state. We can imagine a similar experience when going on a long trip in a car, or as T.S. Eliot caught it, going on a train ride in his *Four Quartets*. In this state things just rise and fall in a still centre that is moving. See IV, 4. 7–8 for an excellent description of the experience and the different ways that time and space appear on the different levels.

<sup>39</sup> In an accomplished discussion on what happens to pain as we go through the various levels, Plotinus shows how pain emerges in the downward spiral into the body. For him, the soul is unaffected by pain, having the function of assigning where the pain is. The experience of the tortured bears witness to this, where a sudden bifurcation happens and they feel the pain in their bodies while another part of them stays clear, calm and unaffected, and the torturer has the strange position of being the tortured person's liberator (see IV, 4. 19 for an extended discussion of pain).

through to the level of Soul could result in an experiencing of oneness deep in Nature, or of the inner beauty of a lover, the moment of music that anticipates its whole movement, etc. Entering the world of Forms could result in a new vision of the virtues of justice or courage or wisdom, and depending on the vision the self would work in this new world in different ways (V, 8. 10). Yet no matter what the experience, certain features make the level what it is in a structuring way. A holistic pattern emerges that blends the various elements together into a whole that shines through its parts. What a vision to elaborate on pedagogically. Plotinus faces up to the task of revealing to his students the complexity of this journey towards the One, showing the whole picture and not just one way upwards. *The Enneads* exist in the western tradition as the first great pedagogical attempt to lift students from the dual to the non-dual in a language of clarity and reason, as well as that of meditation, exhortation, and beauty. We do not have the mythological poetics of Homer and Virgil, rather the systematic pushing of the history of western thought towards a point it has always hinted at but never fully elaborated on – the formless Good beyond Being.

We begin with the infamous dive downwards into our image that coalesces around us as a body, into the salt of forgetfulness. We have a meeting of the two worlds of Soul and Matter, resulting in the formation of an ‘inbetween’, something that is not a part but becomes so with incorporation (V, 2. 1) It is separated off from the whole above, but keeps its wholeness within, a Whole passing to a whole (IV, 1. 1). Thus this inbetween is both divisible and indivisible, both whole and part, essence and mixture. The danger is that in the plunge downwards a forgetting of its undivided nature takes place and an unconsciously deep embrace of particularity occurs, a particularity destined to suffer, age and die.<sup>40</sup> The key point is that it never fully became a parted thing, but remains a ‘self

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<sup>40</sup> In a powerful image Plotinus describes this process of those drawn downwards by the splendour of the objects they illuminate as a steersman of a storm-tossed ship who ‘is so intent on saving it that he forgets his own interest and never thinks that he is recurrently in peril of being dragged down with the vessel;

gathered integral', and is parted among bodies merely in the sense that bodies, 'in virtue of their own sundered existence, cannot receive it unless in some partitive mode (IV, 2.1). There is an astounding joining of two worlds in which brevity opens out to multiplicity' (IV, 3. 5). In this process various traits emerge that did not exist in the non-dual world above. Reasoning is one of them. It is only when we work in a world 'distracted with cares, diminished in strength' that the need for reasoning arises. Take, for example, two craftsmen, the one working in the flush of creative power, not hesitating, just doing, fully immersed; the other faced by difficulties and stresses, stopping and deliberating, trying to work out what to do. The one works in the sheer force of his nature, the other stops and thinks about what his nature is; the one is pure present consciousness, the other slips in and out of it as he tries to take advice and integrate various problems presenting themselves. Plotinus works with emergence in a way very different from our modern bottom up versions. For him additions arise in the downward spiral, additions that *take away* from the fullness of being and fragment it, thus necessitating the arising of more additions like reasoning, memory and virtue. Modern psychologies tend to work upwards in a developmental whirl where new traits emerge as we go up levels. For Plotinus this is only half the picture incorrectly seen, for emergence mostly happens downwards with additions that subtract from fullness in fragmentation, the path upwards being a burning away of these emergencies, allowing the fullness of being to shine forth more completely in its effortlessness.<sup>41</sup> The path upwards is one of simplification where the many reduce

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similarly the souls are intent upon contriving for their charges and finally come to be pulled down by them; they are ... gripped and held by their concern for the realm of Nature' (IV, 3. 17).

<sup>41</sup> 'In that you have entered into the All, no longer content with the part; you cease to think of yourself as under limit but, laying all such determination aside, you become an All. No doubt you were always that, but there has been an addition and by that addition you are diminished; for the addition was not from the realm of Being – you can add nothing to Being – but from non-being... By the lessening of the alien in you, you increase. Cast it aside and there is the All within you...Not that it has to come and so be present to you; it is you that have turned from it. And turn though you may, you have not severed yourself; it is there.' (VI, 5. 12). Plotinus is speaking from the astonishing experience of finding a still centre inside that has

into an unfussy clarity that allows complexity to arise within its stillness. The task becomes one of describing what happens to the soul as it rids itself of the shifting, fleeting, lustful body and penetrates deeper into itself, lifting itself upwards to the Intellectual Realm.<sup>42</sup> Plotinus describes this sudden lifting onto a new level as follows.

When we seize anything in the direct intellectual act there is room for nothing else than to know and to contemplate the object; the subject is not included in the act of knowing, but asserts itself, if at all, later and is a sign of the altered; this means that, once purely in the Intellectual, no one of us can have any memory of our experience here...there can be no memory in the intellectual world...all is presence There; for there is no discursive thought, no passing from one point to another (IV, 4. 1).

For his students, as for us, this entry into the Intellectual world sounds exceptionally strange and it is here that the flavour of *The Enneads* as an engaging set of teachings comes out in full force. A rapid set of questions and answers follow—

‘No division then, of general into species? No progression from lower to higher, to wider generality?’

‘For the higher principle (the Intellectual) evidently not, since it is fully realized as a self-contained unity.’

‘But why not for the Soul which has attained to the Intellectual Realm?’

‘Yet even the Soul may have the intuition, not by stages and parts, of that Being which is with without stage and part.’

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always been there, and that continues to be beautiful even when not looked at, much like an unwatched sunrise.

<sup>42</sup> It is not that Plotinus hates the body, or desires, but that he sees the manner in which the physical impacts on the ability to travel into the abstract realities of the Hypostases. Pierre Hadot makes this the major point of his brilliantly influential *Plotinus or the simplicity of vision* (1998). Indeed the ascetic shift into the One enables a more subtle ability to enjoy all of existence in its complex fullness.

‘But that would be in the nature of grasping a pure unity?’

‘No: in the nature of grasping all the intellectual facts of a many that constitutes a unity. For since the object of vision has variety (distinction within its essential oneness) the intuition must be multiple and the intuitions various, just as we see at the one glance eyes and nose and all the rest’ (IV, 4.1 punctuation adapted).<sup>43</sup>

In this process the reader finds himself engaging in the debate, also asking questions that are mostly answered as the text develops, hearing the excited rallying of mystified voices, which slowly quiet as the text continues to its end point, finally pushing towards a meadow of truth where the sounds of debate settle and are replaced by sustained meditations and exhortations that guide the reader into the next level. But we are still explicating what it is to enter into the world of the higher soul, the world where the soul touches Intellect and our faculty of memory seems to evaporate. ‘Do you even lose memory of your personality?’ Yes, says Plotinus, there is no thought that the contemplator is the self. He elaborates, clearly working from his own experience –

In contemplative vision, especially when it is vivid, we are not at the time aware of our own personality; we are in possession of ourselves, but the activity is towards the object of vision with which the thinker becomes identified; he has made himself over as matter to be shaped (IV, 4. 1).

The duality has become a unity, the contemplator has become the total through entirely emptying himself, becoming a pure potentiality open to pure actuality. One becomes what one beholds. This is the upward movement of a soul contemplating the Intellectual world. It is a clear account of *absorption*.

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<sup>43</sup> There are superb examples throughout *The Enneads* of this, one of the best is found in IV, 4. 7, where a reader can smell the teaching happening.

In this upward movement, the Soul is now presented with various possibilities: it can continue the contemplation in an elaborative fashion, it can attempt a further upward surge into the One, or it can sink back down again. Plotinus notes that the last possibility is the most frequent for the Soul ‘cannot suffer that unity, it falls in love with its own powers and possessions, and desires to stand apart; it leans outward, so to speak: then it appears to acquire a memory of itself (IV, 4, 3). But now it has a memory of three different worlds – that of Intellect, Soul and Material World – and has a tendency towards both the higher and the lower worlds (IV, 4.18). The task for Plotinus is to continually rouse and revive the upper memories in his writings while stilling the memories of the flesh. To do this he paints a picture of this material world as evil, as something to be fled from, and describes the worlds above as carefully and as beautifully as he possibly can. He has been to these worlds, stayed there, elaborated on them, and come back down again.

Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-enclosed; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever in the Intellectual is less than the Supreme: yet, there comes a moment of descent from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending (IV, 8. 1).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> With apologies and thanks to Plotinus I have included a poetic rendition of this based on my own experience.

Once

It has happened (

Lifted out

Into myself

The pressing question for the novice practitioner is not only what the upper worlds look like but what happens when he succeeds in breaking through into the non-dual and then sinks down again.

He now feels the uncomfortable union of his upper soul and the world, he will sometimes incline to one side and then the other, now feeling the lustful pleasure and misery of lack and desire, then longing for pure unity and goodness. Yet at the centre of this being is always the higher soul, something that remains unaffected by the meeting of the two worlds. This centre is undivided and present, even if we fail to see it because we look outwards all the time, indeed it is what allows us to look and feel. 'There can be no perception without a unitary percipient whose identity enables it to grasp an object in its entirety (IV, 7. 6). This is a line of argument that Kant took on in his transcendental deductions, pointing out the necessity for a unified, present simplicity at the heart of a

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Becoming external to all

I enter my centre

Be holding Beauty

Here

More than ever

Enter Entire

) there

Comes a moment

Of descent,

And after that,

I ask myself,

How it happens

That I am descending

human being – except that Kant took its divinity away. It is this core that must be continuously turned to.

Even when only looking outwards we are still faced with the sheer beauty of the universe and have to raise the question of its existence and creation, of what moves matter in such exquisite ways. During the quietest moments while in nature there suddenly appears a living force running through it all and it seems to have breathed life into the entire, deepening and enlivening its horizons. Plotinus puts it more beautifully than I can. Once a human being has stilled himself and become worthy to look, holding itself in quietude–

Let not merely the enveloping body be at peace, body's turmoil stilled, but all that lies around, earth at peace, and sea at peace, and air and the very heavens. Into that heaven, all at rest, let the great soul be conceived to roll inward at every point, penetrating, permeating, from all sides pouring in its light. As the rays of the sun throwing their brilliance upon a lowering cloud make it gleam all gold, so the soul entering the material expanse of the heavens has given life, has given immortality (V, 1. 2).

Such a meditation on the outward beauty of the world inexorably leads the soul inwards as he recognises the same radiant force of light within himself as a part of this existence. This brings us back to the inward path. So we go back there again after listening to the descriptions, after purifying ourselves, after having briefly tasted its wonders. For Plotinus, we must continue inwards. Suddenly a direct jump into the Intellectual will result.

This involves a two part process: the ascetic separation of body from soul; then the immediate jump into the uppermost region of pure soul where it touches the Intellect. The process of purification allows the human being to see more clearly its likeness to the non-dual levels (V, 3. 9). It must work with the two-fold inheritance of passion and grief,

attempting to disengage from these forces by withdrawing within to its still centre. Plotinus is level headed about such a policy.

Necessary pleasures and all the activity of the senses it will employ only for medicament and assuagement lest its work be impeded. Pain it will combat, but, failing the cure, it will bear meekly and ease it by refusing to assent to it. All passionate action it will check; the suppression will be complete if that be possible, but at worst the Soul will never itself take fire but will keep the involuntary and uncontrolled outside its own precincts and rare and weak at that (I, 2. 5).

The second part of the process involves the soul suddenly coming upon a whole new world that it always already was, an intuitive level of non-dual experience. He will become the Intellectual Cosmos, filled with light, illuminated by The Good which radiates truth on him (IV, 7. 10). This jump into the Intellectual World is so rapid because the pure soul was always united with the Intellectual at its highest point and never lost this connection when diving into the material world. ‘...[O]ur human soul has not sunk entire; something of it is continuously in the Intellectual Realm, though if that part, which is in the sphere of sense, hold the mastery...it keeps us blind to what the upper phase holds in contemplation’ (IV, 8. 8). Plotinus goes on to describe in rich detail what the experience of this new level entails – to ‘teach the soul its race and worth’ (V, 1. 1).<sup>45</sup>

A way into understanding Intellect or pure mind is to begin with the common sense understanding of what happens in introspection – when one part of the self observes another part of itself. Plotinus points out that this way of conceiving the act leaves the

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<sup>45</sup> The warning example of Phaeton is not sounded by Plotinus – the danger of recognizing one’s divinity, becoming overly confident about it, and destroying oneself and the surrounding world in the process. Every new level has its own dangers and pathologies that must be recognised and worked with. Plotinus recognises the pathologies of the lower levels but does not give an account of the damage that can be wrought by the higher levels. There are dangers in the heights as well as the depths.

knower out of the equation – that which does the looking – even when what is looked at is the knower. When looking in at oneself as a ‘content’, the self doing the looking is not looked at, for it is doing the looking. This way of conceiving the attempt at self knowledge always leaves something hidden and unexamined and thus does not get to the pure, active Intellect that is behind the whole process. Plotinus gets out of this dilemma by pushing for a non-dual state in which subject and object become one in the act of self-contemplation (V, 3. 1). The question then arises of what it is like for a self-knowing in which knower and known are indistinguishable. The state must result in the phenomenological feeling of representation disappearing. The seen object is not taken as a representation of reality by the mind, rather the seeing subject and seen object become present as one thing (V, 3. 5). What is affirmed by a mind in this stage is also what it is in the affirming. In this state the object seen becomes active and alive, it is the act itself. In the normal activity of a human being in a dual state, we work –in something– looking out at a separate world. In the non-dual intellectual state this division disappears and what is left is just vision, just being, just an alive and luminous world that is both you and the world without boundaries. It is much like what happens to a bubble when it finally comes to the surface. Suddenly it becomes the air it always was without the separation felt underwater. At a specific point it opens to the heavens, seeing the luminous blue from one angle – its angle of emergence – but without the boundary it had underwater. One of Plotinus’ major pedagogical challenges is to

teach our soul how the Intellectual-Principle exercises self vision; the phase thus to be taught is that which already touches the intellectual order, that which we call the understanding or Intelligent Soul... already of itself in some degree an Intellectual-Principle... This phase must be brought to understand by what means it has knowledge of the thing it sees and warrant for what it affirms (V, 3. 6).

This level of the soul that is already touching the Intellectual works by compulsion and not by persuasion. It knows itself at the stroke – the being is the act (V, 3. 7). The seen becomes the seeing and the seeing as seen (V, 3. 8). The level of Intellect is thus one of a

pure seeing that works in a luminous world that is both the seer and seen in one, live whole. Initially this non-duality is experienced in the inward glance of 'self vision'. With stabilization, this inner non-duality will be able to sustain itself as it turns outwards with new eyes.

Plotinus elaborates on the level of the Intellectual in a number of places, but his most beautiful rendition is found in V, 8 – *On the Intellectual Beauty*. In it he describes a world of ease and transparency, where beings are lucid and open to each other. Each contains the All and sees the All in the other, so that the All pervades throughout. It is like being drunk on the wine of beauty to the point where one can no longer remain as an onlooker at a spectacle – an inside looking at an outside – suddenly the duality collapses and 'the clear eyed hold the vision inside themselves, though, for the most part, they have no idea that it is within but look towards it as to something beyond them and see it as an object of vision caught by a direction of the will' (V, 8. 10). Plotinus is attempting to capture what happens in the non-dual moment. The outer world goes inside, becomes a part of oneself, to the point where one becomes this outside, and as such it becomes an alive vision that works from a particular point – vision caught by a direction of the will. As the head turns, so does the vision alter, but in the non-dual moment all that happens is that the whole luminosity shifts without there being an inside that made it happen to an outside, there is just the ever changing luminous whole coming from a still opening, a meadow of truth.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A consequence of this is that the way we conceive of 'planning' also disappears. 'Here we labour towards some one occurrence in preference to another and it goes in a sort of dread of the unfitting; where only the fitting can occur, there is no foreseeing...the serviceable thing appeared and at once approved itself so' (VI, 7. 1). It is not that we cannot change our minds as the situation alters, it is that we do not hold onto preconceptions to twist the current situation. When in a state of pure seeing, there is a clear path that opens in the act of the event. As the situation changes so does the path. Previous paths are not held onto, just the current path that is always there, always totally in tune with the situation. The Tao catches the experience of this way exactly.

It is at this point that Plotinus makes his most profound move and it is a move that puts him beyond the reach of all his predecessors. He points out that this non-dual state within the Intellectual still has a subtle duality attached to it. For vision to work it must have something to see, something to act upon. Now it may become one with this thing it acts upon – the multiplicity may become a unity – but this does not elide the fact that it is not a pure, undivided unity to begin with. There needs to be a multiplicity first for the unificatory effect. The intellectual world must of necessity be initially dualistic before it becomes non-dual, it depends on multiplicity for its non-duality. Plotinus hones this point with great skill.

Unless there is something beyond bare unity, there can be no vision: vision must converge with a visible object. And this which the seer is to see can be only multiple, no undistinguishable unity; nor could a universal unity find anything upon which to exercise any act; all, one and desolate, would be utter stagnation; in so far as there is action, there is diversity (V, 3. 10).

This subtle but necessary dualism contained at the heart of non-dual seeing has enormous consequences for Plotinus. Crucially it means that the Intellectual-Principle cannot fully take in the pure unity of the One, for it is not a pure unity itself, but a manifold that has become a unity. It becomes a Unity, but does so successively, as a part becoming the whole. In the attempt to become one with the One, it has already made a representation of the One as something to become one with, and as such cannot fully become what that One is – an undifferentiated Unity. This is the tragedy of the emanation and return universe.<sup>47</sup> In emanating it pours out blind and pure, not knowing what it is. As soon as it

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<sup>47</sup> Our present 'deconstructive' consciousness understands the absence of the One in the very attempt to become One. As Derrida notes in an uncharacteristically positive statement, Plotinus is the main exception to his critique of the 'metaphysics of presence' and also the precursor to Deconstructionism. See Derrida's essay 'Form and Meaning', note 14 in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973) 127–28. Thank you to Kerrigan and Braden (1989) 104 for the tip. It is a marvellous thing, to contemplate the most post-modern of

turns around in the adoration it feels for its source, it becomes something different from the source and now has to represent to itself what that source is, and in the process lose some of its richness. As pure as the knowing of its prior can be, it is still a knowing that comes from initial *altering*, from a turning. Total knowing is always a suture of a divide and no matter how neat the stitching that again unites the two worlds the scar remains. As Plotinus puts it

The Intellectual-Principle, in the act of knowing the Transcendent, is a manifold. It knows the Transcendent in very essence but, with all its effort to grasp that prior as a pure unity, it goes forth amassing successive impressions, so that, to it, the object becomes multiple (V, 3. 11).

It is what happens when light returns to Light, it sees itself but in the very act loses its undivided unity and is forced into the position of now knowing what this Unity is, not being it. Pure light explodes into the colours it always was. the One transcends knowing, no matter how pure the knowing is. It is before knowing, before any definition can be attempted, before colour, it exists in a purity that does not have limits. A defined One would not be the absolute, for what did the defining and what exists outside the line drawn by the definition? The consequences of this for any knowledge or statement about the One becomes overwhelming, for any attempt at comprehension is precisely what makes the endeavour fail.<sup>48</sup> Plotinus provides a close analysis of how we think and speak to illustrate the dilemma.

Consciousness...is an act exercised upon a manifold: and even intellection, earlier (nearer to the divine) though it is, implies that the agent turns back upon itself,

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philosophies in the ancient. Whether Plotinus is merely a precursor rather than a towering Father over a troublesome son is a moot point.

<sup>48</sup> Unlike Semele, who gets burnt to death by the power of her lover Zeus when demanding to see him in his full glory, the learning soul might not fully *comprehend* the One, but can *experience* the glory of the One in its 'entirety'.

upon a manifold, then. If that agent says no more than 'I am a being', it speaks (by the implied dualism) as a discoverer of the extern; and rightly so, for being is a manifold; when it faces towards the unmanifold and says, 'I am that being', it misses both itself and the being (since the simplex cannot be divided into knower and known)... This accepted, it follows that anything that is to be thought of as the most utterly simplex of all, cannot have self-intellection; to have that would mean being multiple. The Transcendent, thus, neither knows itself nor is known in itself (V, 3. 13).

It is this astounding conclusion that informs all of Plotinus' work, thinking and practice. The beginning and end of his whole massive pedagogical project pushes the learning soul towards this point. We come up against this silent wall that does not allow mind, even the purest mind, full entry. Predictably, the students of Plotinus do not allow him to get away with this 'line of thought' easily. 'We seem to be talking about this untalkable thing quite a lot' would have been one of the first points made (V, 3. 14). Plotinus responds by showing how it is possible to say what it is not, and to also speak in the light of its sequels, but most importantly, that it can be entered with practice, even if it cannot be stated by reason. Here he will have to point and show, saying will not do. The attempt at a negative description of the One, of a chronicling of its priors and the path to travel, is not enough. All this does is put the soul in more pain. It can pour over the words and descriptions as much as it likes, understand all it wants, but no characterization of The Good will be strong enough to bring the soul to the One for it will always take it up item after item, thought after thought, its very act missing that in which there is no thought. Something else needs to happen and Plotinus describes what it is.

All the need is met by a contact purely intellectual. At the moment of touch there is no power whatever to make any affirmation; there is no leisure; reasoning upon the vision is for afterwards. We may know we have had the vision when the Soul has suddenly taken light. This light is from the Supreme and is the Supreme...and

this is the true end set before the Soul, to take that light, to see the Supreme by the Supreme and not by the light of any other principle (V, 3.17).

Here we have the end point of Plotinus' pedagogical project, for the Soul to take light from the One and to see the One, not with its own colourful light, but to use the very light of the One. How can this be accomplished the students ask. Plotinus replies uncompromisingly

Cut away everything (V, 3. 17) and wait tranquilly (V, 5. 8).

At this stage of learning the Soul is stable in the brilliant light of the Intellectual world after the initial rush of being touched by the non-dual and the dropping downwards. It has become a soul of silence to and to and to the point of still.<sup>49</sup> The various options open out again on this new level of stable tranquillity. It can contemplate the One in an Intellectual way; it can elaborate on this contemplation by exploring the world of the Intellect and discover its basic categories of Being, Motion, Stability, Identity and Difference (VI, 2. 15); it can again be lifted upwards by the downward ecstatic surge that created Intellect; or drift downwards into the world of soul and body again. We are still pushing upwards and Plotinus' best characterization of how the shift from the Intellectual Level to the One occurs is found in VI, 7.

The first point is that at this level the student has become, throughout their being, what it is **to just see**. Yet this world of stable non-dual seeing of the multiple in all its splendour is still not high enough. The Beautiful is not yet The Good (V, 5. 12). Plotinus urges we must make haste and go yet higher. How?

The best way of putting the question is to ask whether, when Intellectual-Principle looked towards The Good, it had Intellection of that unity as a multiplicity and,

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<sup>49</sup> The last phrase is from Wallace Stevens (1945) 181.

itself a unity, applied its Act by breaking into parts what it was too feeble to know as a whole (VI, 7.16).

That is the path of Intellectual contemplation as an already formed unity turning back to the One, but before it turned around and looked it was something else, and this is what Plotinus wants to point us towards.<sup>50</sup> At first it was not Intellect already formed looking towards The Good, not light turned to light, it was Life pouring out ecstatically, pure light streaming outwards, still blind and white for it has not turned yet to see anything or made a boundary. It is utter and we must adopt its hue. It is to this first stage of Intellect before it formed a boundary as Intellectual-Principle, to what gave life and beauty to the Intellectual-Principle, that Plotinus points us towards as the final journey upwards and in a famous description he shares with us what happens—

The soul taking that outflow from the divine is stirred; seized by a Bacchic passion... it becomes Love. Before that, even Intellectual-Principle with all its loveliness did not stir the soul; for that beauty is dead until it take the light of The Good, and the soul lies supine, cold to all, unquickened even to Intellectual-Principle there before it. But when there enters into it a glow from the divine, it gathers strength, awakens, spreads true wings and however urged by its nearer environing, speeds its buoyant way elsewhere, to something greater to its memory, so long as there exists anything loftier than the near, its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love. Beyond Intellectual-Principle it passes but beyond The Good it cannot, for nothing stands above That (VI, 7. 21).

It is The Good that everything pours out from that is finally returned to and rested in. It is this radiant grace that is the Bloom upon Beauty (VI, 7. 22). It is the gaiety that *is* Good, not merely a knowing of The Good. There is no need for a Prometheus to steal the divine

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<sup>50</sup> ‘At first it was not Intellect looking upon The Good;...we must think of it not as looking but as living’ (VI, 7. 16).

fire, or a Jesus to come down and die for us, we are already a part of this divine outpouring. The completeness of Plotinus' vision strikes us in its simplicity – it is effacement in Light. It is a fragrant out breath of light from the One that gives life to everything else. The Intellectual takes a breath of life from this outpouring emergency and as it does this it sees the One that created it, much as in a kiss of Life between the Word and God. The outpouring breath both creates and sustains the Intellectual-Principle that looks up towards it, caught in the radiant kiss, but now something different from the breath of light. It forms the first seeing of the Prior. And this new Life itself breathes outwards with a lesser breath (some of the light dimmed) and produces a lover that takes an in breath as it turns to look, a world of Soul. It is a similar world to that in which bride and Bridegroom kiss, sustained in the light of God. Finally the Universal Soul breathes outwards with the last of the life and forms the world as we know it, with matter as that formless emptiness without breath. Plotinus urges us to feel the touch of hot breath in us, to contemplate it and follow it upwards until we finally get to a place that was before breathing, a place called The Good. Once this happens all we have is one breath. In this place where the alone meets the Alone, there is no vision, no union, no good or evil. In this sudden manifestation there is nothing between, all distinction fades. It is as lover and beloved here, the soul has no awareness of being in body and there is no naming or observation, and who she is that looks she does not care to know. She will not swop this for anything else for there is no better or higher, all the rest exists as something lower. In perfect judgement she knows with certainty that this was always her path, but this affirmation only comes afterwards and silently (VI, 7. 34). Even the act of Intellect that she so loved is now dismissed, even if it was through this act that she was lifted up into The Good, for it was the loving pouring out of Intellect before it knew itself as Intellect that lifted her into this place beyond Beauty. It happened in a loving act unattended by knowing, going beyond the Intellectual-Principle in a devastating torrent surge upwards beyond knowledge (VI, 7. 35).

## Closing

This is the ‘grand learning’ (VI, 7. 36) that is all-important for Plotinus. An education that does not have loving The Good as its informing principle is lifeless, an education that does not work with the unique complexity of its students, crude. In a compelling summary of his whole pedagogical project Plotinus lays out the necessary levels that need to be understood and practiced if an education is to be considered complete. Firstly attain

some knowledge (of The Good). We come to this learning by analogies, by abstractions, by our understanding of its subsequents, of all that is derived from The Good, by the upward steps towards it. Purification has The Good for its goal; so the virtues, all right ordering, ascent within the Intellectual, settlement therein, banqueting upon the divine – by these methods one becomes, to self and all else, at once seer and seen; identical with Being and Intellectual-Principle and the entire living all, we no longer see the Supreme as an external; we are near now, the next is That and it is close at hand, radiant above the Intellectual. Here we put aside all learning; disciplined to this pitch, established in beauty, the quester holds knowledge still of the ground he rests on, but, suddenly, swept beyond it all by the very crest of the wave of Intellect surging beneath, he is lifted and sees, never knowing how; the vision floods the eyes with light, but it is not a light showing some other object, the light is itself the vision (VI, 7. 36).

Plotinus, in his educational genius, pointed to the journey again and again. Each of the *Enneads* contains the whole in its particular form, suggesting this way then that, encouraging the learning soul to begin its own journey and providing fore-structuring pointers to a whole variety of preferred modes of learning.

Last words tend to be apocryphal. Plotinus, on his deathbed with only Eustochius by his side, turned to him and said ‘Try to bring back the god in you to the Divine in the universe.’ Even in his dying he remained the teacher of the learning soul. With his last breath, as he went from the alone to the Alone, he said ‘I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All’<sup>51</sup> giving his last kiss to the Abyss. Yes

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<sup>51</sup> I have combined the two traditional last statements of Plotinus together. Neither statements’ certainty is known but see the end of the MacKenna translation for an account.

## Chapter Seven: Augustine<sup>1</sup>

### Opening

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<sup>1</sup> Why Augustine? In late Antiquity/early Christianity there were many texts that strongly fell within the criteria of this thesis. From early Greek Christianity we have many superb texts on the pedagogy of the soul. Among the most important was Athanasius' influential and hagiographic account of Antony's experiences in *Life of Antony*. It had a major influence on the monastic and ascetic shift so noticeable in the Fourth Century C.E. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and *On the Song of Songs* provided careful descriptions of the journey of the soul towards God in a manner radically different from Philo and Origen. His was the 'first systematic negative theology in Christian history' (McGinn [1992] 141), directly breaking from the Greek tradition of viewing limitlessness as imperfection with a conception of God as boundless, unlimited and incomprehensible. Then there was Evagrius Ponticus' *Ad Monachos*, an astounding collection of pedagogical techniques guiding the learning soul to the Holy Trinity in aphoristic form, based on a path strongly influenced by Origen. Within early Latin Christianity there was an equal range of choice. Ambrose of Milan was one of the first Christians to rework Neo-Platonism into a coherent Christian pedagogy, especially in his *On Abraham*, which also shows strong influences from Plato, Philo and Origen. He managed to synthesize accounts of the ascent of the soul found in Origen, Philo, Plotinus, and most importantly Paul. We also have Jerome's pedagogic letter to the chaste Eustochium celebrating virginity, using the *Song of Songs* for support. The monastic works of John Cassian, deeply steeped in Greek Christianity, taught the Latin west how to enter the full experience of monastic life as well as providing detailed accounts of his meetings with various spiritual fathers. Finally, there was Hilary of Poitiers (310–367), who wrote an autobiographical account of his conversion with a careful itinerary for the learning soul to follow in *the Trinity* – written a generation earlier than the *Confessions*. Yet Augustine towers above these writers in the originality of his thought, the beauty of his writing, and the influence he holds on later traditions. Furthermore, he distinctively broke from Platonic and Neo-Platonic influences, introducing a radically Christian vision that repudiated Plotinus with an account of a weak soul mired in sin, dependent on God's grace. It was due to his difference from Philo, Origen and Plotinus that I chose Augustine for this chapter. A final contributory reason lay in the astonishingly original nature of the *Confessions* – the *sustained* use of his own life to pedagogically guide the learning soul from the depths of sin to the heights of God. I must thank McGinn's monumental series on the history of western mysticism (1992, 1994, 1998) at this point. It has been a trusted guide through the centuries we travel in this thesis, providing a detailed overview that is consistently interesting, accurate and embodies the principles of scholarship.

And Augustine<sup>2</sup> climbed the heights of Ancient higher learning and found it wanting. He ascended Diotima's ladder of beauty, travelled through the regions of higher wisdom that

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine was born in North Africa in a town called Thagaste around 354 C.E, and spent most of his life in Africa, leaving her shores for only four tumultuous years in Rome and Milan. He lived to see the Roman Empire crumble, dying in Hippo with the 'barbarians' at the gate at the age of 76. He rose to a position of enormous power within the Church, becoming the Bishop of Northern Africa, but his influence spread far wider than this during his own lifetime. He engaged in, and mostly won, key controversies over Christian doctrine that were to define how Christianity was to develop from then onwards. He received a classical rhetorical education, ironically putting these skills to good use in reformatting ancient culture on the Christian foundation of a Grace-full Trinitarian God who created the world out of nothing. It was not a simple transition for Augustine. His early work showed confidence in the ability of a classical vision of the Intellectual Life to lift the learning soul upwards, and he himself experienced its power to do so. Increasingly, this optimism in the individual's ability to reach the Divine faded into a more sombre vision of a world divided between the Saved and the Damned, with God's Grace being the operative function in determining either. His education was initially completed in Thagaste and Carthage, and at the age of 16 he began a sixteen year long relationship with a Christian girl who bore him a son, Adeodatus. He quickly moved from student to teacher, teaching in both Thagaste and Carthage before going to Rome at the age of 29 in search of better students. They proved no better, disappearing from his courses before paying him, so he applied for a lecturing post in Rhetoric in Milan, got it and began to have grander visions of success in the secular world. It made strategic sense to arrange a marriage with a rich and well to do family, so he abandoned his long time lover for a richer and younger girl (ten years old at the time). In the two year wait for her to reach legal marrying age, he took on another lover. With worldly success beckoning, he suddenly, at the age of 32, resigned his lecturing post, went to Cassiciam after 'seeing the light', and in an exhilarated frenzy, wrote the earliest extant works. He was then baptized in 387 before returning to Africa. Unfortunately his mother, who had long hoped for his full conversion, died whilst waiting at Ostia for august conditions to cross the Mediterranean with her Christian son – not before they shared a joint vision of the Divine, however. Two years later Augustine then lost his much loved son, and so began a life that immersed itself in the church, rather than friends, lovers and family. At the age of 37 he was press-ganged into taking on the priestly office for the community of Hippo, becoming a bishop four years later. There he was to remain until his death thirty-five years later. It was not a quiet life in the outback. He became actively involved in three crucial controversies that partly structured the forms of Medieval Christianity – the Manichean, Donatist and Pelagian controversies. In the first he battled against his own earlier belief in the Manichean universe of Good and Evil as separate forces struggling against each other, arguing for a position where God was supreme and not involved in a 'battle' with Evil. In the second he battled against

Philo described, saw the light that revealed the end point of the Plotinian ascent of the alone to the Alone, and found that it was not enough. To tremble in a glance of the Blissful and then fall back into inferior things was not satisfactory. The philosophical experience of non-duality could not carry the day, it did not have the force to sustain itself or to overcome the weight of desire clutched by humanity. Augustine was left, after tasting the Light, with a recognition of his own weakness and inability to sustain these heights of learning. In an honest grappling with this failure he emerged with a set of experiences that slowly separated him from the Classical tradition. He lived the slow divide between the Classical and the Medieval and we can track this rift in his writings,<sup>3</sup>

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an overly rigorous and fanatical interpretation of the sacraments by the Donatists, and in the third engaged in a protracted debate over the nature of grace and free will with the Pelagians who insisted that it must be possible to achieve salvation through good works and not be totally reliant on Grace. How could God punish us for not reaching something that is impossible to reach, they asked – an *ought* implies a *can*. It was the last controversy that rigidified Augustine's stance on damnation and grace, leaving a picture of him that has coloured future interpretations of his work, yet his earlier struggle with the Donatists was precisely for a more charitable interpretation of Church. He thus occupies much of the middle ground between over zealousness of faith (Donatists) and over confidence in the powers of man (Pelagians) – such would be the most charitable interpretation of his life work. He died, meditating in tears on the nature of his own sinfulness, open to God's Grace, his heart begging for Mercy.

<sup>3</sup> We have over a hundred works written by Augustine, two hundred letters and around four hundred sermons. I have not read all his work. There is much agreement on his crucial works and it is to these that I have turned. The earliest writings are clearly inspired by the Neo-Platonists, but as Augustine matures in the faith, the insights of Paul begin to come out more starkly. The works I consulted were: *Contra Academicos* (Against the Academicians); *De Libero Arbitrio* (The Problem of Free Choice); *De Quantitate Animae* (The Greatness of the Soul); *De Magistro* (The Teacher); *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine); *Confessiones* (Confessions); *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (On the Psalms); *De Trinitate* (On The Trinity), *De Genesi ad Litteram* (On The Literal Meaning of Genesis), *De Civitate Dei* (On The City of God); and *Retractationes* (Reconsiderations). Of these I have found *Confessions* and *On The Trinity* most useful in charting the educational path of the learning soul in this chapter.

especially in the account of the *Confessions*.<sup>4</sup> To some fall the privilege of experiencing the consolidated heights of an innovation well worked through, of taking a tradition to its own heights. To others fall the task of beginning again after experiencing the inadequacies of these heights. One has the task of quintessence, the other of a murky struggle for first principles after falling from the breaking heights. Augustine developed a lived awareness of the epitome of classical learning exemplified by Plotinus, found it wanting, had to start again, and in his beginning blazed a trail that the Latin west would follow for a millennium and more.

### **Confessions of a learning soul**

In the *Confessions* Augustine undertook the task of describing the stages of learning that an individual goes through, from the depths to the heights, using himself as the example. It is a seductive technique for it engages the reader on an empathic level. Augustine speaks directly to us, we feel with him as he grapples with his childhood foibles, his adolescent exploits, his first love and the tragedy of its breakdown, the death of a friend, the excited discovery of new ideas, the ascent to the Intellectual heights, the inevitable descent and the conversion in tears to a world seeped in Grace and Sin. The analogies of the Cave, of Abraham and Sarah, of Solomon and his bride, for all their charm do not capture the levels of education that a learning soul travels through better than an actual account of a real, live human being going through the stages. It is less about doctrine and more about what it is to live this thing called life. *Confessions* is a best seller, a racy account of the education of a human being, full of the gritty details of everyday life, and we will use it in the first half of this chapter to illuminate the levels of learning that the ancients travelled through as well as preparing the way for the medieval shift that Augustine began to live in the second half of his life. The *Confessions* of Augustine have

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<sup>4</sup> I use the Chadwick translation (Oxford 1991). It comes with an excellent set of footnotes that highlight the increasing recognition of the influence of Plotinus on Augustine.

been dissected, analysed and poured over ever since it was written,<sup>5</sup> so another commentary is not necessary. Rather than attempt to recapture the splendid complexity of this charming text and Augustine's life I will use it as a summary device to pull together the levels of ancient learning and as a stepping off point for our meeting with the Medievals.

We do not begin the educational account with infancy for Augustine, as is the custom with the moderns, but with the prior need to celebrate and praise that from which we come from – God. The whole account is framed by the recognition that God stirs man to praise him, that we have been made by God for God and that we will not rest until we rest in him (*Conf.* I, I [1]). It mimics Plotinus (*Enneads* VI, 7. 23) but the One is now listening and caring, and 'desires' the love of his creation. Augustine is going to confess how he came to restlessly rest in God. The question of a beginning is thus complex, for he cannot begin with his birth, or the birth of his parents, but must start in that place before beginning, the 'place' of God. It is a place of paradox and initially all that Augustine does is pose question after question: 'Who calls upon you when he does not know you? What place is there where my God can enter into me? How can I call you to come if I am already in you? Who are you then, my God? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? What am I to you that you have commanded me to love you, and that, if I fail to love you, you are angry with me and threaten me with vast miseries?' (*Conf.* I, II [2]–I, V [6]).<sup>6</sup> The difference to Plotinus is profound. It is a man

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<sup>5</sup> The combination of text and life is brought out powerfully by Peter Brown's astounding *Augustine of Hippo* (1967). There is also Gary Wills' refreshing *Saint Augustine* (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Balthasar notes that one of the most difficult questions of all is why and how a movement away from God occurred in the first place, and he praises Augustine's response.

As Augustine observes with astounding profundity, '*The movement away from God does not come from God, so where does it come from? If you put the question like that, I must reply that I do not know. That may sadden you, but my answer is still right. There can be no knowledge of what is*

crying out here, a confused human being, and he is addressing himself to another, to a greater Other who cares and listens. It is the confessions of a man whose soul is too small for God, a soul in ruins that can only be restored by the grace of God and sustained within the community of the Church. The key point is that by the time Augustine is writing his life story he has been restored by Grace, he has experienced in himself a 'likeness' to God. The *Confessions* is less of an autobiography and more of a pedagogical use of his own life to illuminate, by analogy, the nature of God and the path towards him.<sup>7</sup> As such, it is one of the most powerful educational texts in the western canon. The double register that the first half of this chapter occurs within is therefore a characterization of the journey of the learning soul towards God, and a continual illumination of the nature of the Divine as the process unfolds. The *Confessions* is seeped in the Holy. Although we follow a progression in learning, the writing does not ever lose the result of having arrived at a place beyond learning. It is the tale of a life unknowingly

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*nothing.* 'Why should one need to know it?' It is the movement of alienation, which Plotinus and Origen built into the foundations of their systems and then subdued by theological thinking, just as Hegel finally captured it in a system of dialectical necessities; Augustine, however, refuses to provide a final explanation for the yawning gulf of sin... Enough if the human being understands that he is always outside the unity, that his progress from God requires a re-gress, a return home and a stretching out towards being and towards the lost origin... Enough that he strives to regain, in the spirit of the gospel, the principle, the origin from which he fell – how he does not know – to find himself in a strange land..., enough if he opens the light of his eyes once more to the eternal light (Balthasar *Glory of the Lord* volume ii:105–6 [italics mine] ).

<sup>7</sup> This explains why many of the scenes described in *Confessions* mimic biblical scenes. The temptation of Eve by the snake at the tree of knowledge parallels the famous stealing of fruit from a pear tree, the withdrawal of a tearful Christ to a garden structures Augustine's own conversion experience – the list could continue. The point is that Augustine was free with the details of his own life because it is being used as a pedagogical tool to illuminate the path the learning soul must journey on to come to rest in God

moving towards a likeness of God from a position of already being immersed in that likeness.<sup>8</sup>

In the first stage of learning we pass from infancy to boyhood. It is not a romantic time of innocence and bliss or a time of goodness and purity. The infant's mind is already sinful, jealously and bitterly resenting a blood brother suckling at the same breast, desiring its mother's milk for itself (*Conf. I, VI [10]*). Infancy is not a romantic time of bliss to be hearkened back towards but a tumultuous sea of emotion. Augustine moves quickly to boyhood for he feels 'no sense of responsibility...for a time of which I recall not a single trace' (*Conf. I, VII [12]*). As a child he loved the tales of Virgil but hated the vicious discipline that went with early education. Reflecting back on these experiences he argues for a freeing of curiosity and its channelling by fair discipline rather than rigorous coercion, caning and rote learning (*Conf. I, XIV [23]*). Yet to pick up on these pedagogical suggestions is to miss the real educational purpose of Augustine's reflections on boyhood. Looking back from a position of conversion to Christianity, early education appears more as being tossed into the 'torrent of human custom' an 'infernal river' into which 'the souls of man are thrown' (*Conf. I, XVI [25–26]*). We are hurled into the Symbolic, emerge in it, already imbibing the corruption of earthly culture. Early education consists of the 'wine of error poured into words by drunken teachers and if we failed to drink we were caned and could not appeal to any sober judge' (*Conf. I, XVI [26]*). It had its uses – teaching the child how to read, write and add – but these were chores in comparison to the grand fables of Virgil that retrospectively misconstrued the Divine. Aeneas and Dido enchanted Augustine, but looking back it becomes ironic to be wrapped up in the wanderings of a Roman hero while not seeing the wandering of your own soul, to weep for Dido dying for love of Aeneas but not weep for your own soul dying out of a lack of love for God. The whole nature of a 'literary education' comes under question for Augustine due to its failure to illuminate the nature of God, making of

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<sup>8</sup> We find a similar structure in Proust's magnificent *In search of lost time*, where the ending provides the transcendent key to how the whole narrative journey is structured. Proust also enters the vast palace of memory, only he finds redemption in his innocent childhood at Combray, not a graceful God.

him an erratic adulterer rather than pure Love, forcing the child to imitate emotions of anger, sorrow and lust rather than of humility, faith and love. All of early education that falls under the aegis of Quintilian<sup>9</sup> is shown up for being mere 'smoke and wind' (*Conf.* I, XVII [27]). A rhetorical education in which a rich vocabulary of well-constructed prose with an ornate style is developed cannot hide the emptiness and vanity of the models it uses. To speak well is useless when one is not shown how to live well, where imitation is of shadows and not the light, as Plato well knew. Ultimately a rhetorical education results in tragic emptiness symbolized by the Sophist Lawyer.

A man enjoying a reputation for eloquence takes his position before a human judge with a crowd of men standing round and attacks his opponent with ferocious animosity. He is extremely vigilant in precautions against some error in

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<sup>9</sup> Rhetorical education occurs as a backdrop to the education of the learning soul, as a stage of preliminary learning to be transcended as the learner turns inwards. It definitely gets caricatured by those interested in the inward turn (Augustine being one of the major culprits), but its actual richness as an educational process is undeniable on the level of teaching the learner how to become a decent, respectable, well spoken citizen. Quintilian's great pedagogical text on rhetoric, the *Institutio Oratoria*, has had a chequered history in western education, waxing and waning in influence, reaching its height of influence in the late Medieval period. In it we find admirable objectives that a rhetorician must strive towards – caring for and protecting the innocent; upholding and defending the truth, fighting lawlessness, providing an inspirational model for both the military state and civic society to look towards and be encouraged by. The actual text provides an excellent introduction to the basics of rhetoric: how to introduce it to children; the basics of good argument (*stasis*) and proof; the emotional dimension of good speaking; how to arrange the speech for best effect; how to perfect the style of delivery; how to memorize and then deliver the speech in such a way that a convincing effect is achieved. A good rhetorician is a good man who can show himself to be such. The danger in such an education is that style becomes more important than content and that the whole process becomes formulaic and manipulative. It was precisely this process that Augustine objected towards, but he never lost his admiration for what Rhetoric could achieve, especially in its ability to convince non-believers to turn towards the Christian faith, as his *On Christian Doctrine* illustrates. Augustine places Rhetoric within the educational spectrum as a preliminary level of learning that has to be transcended by a silencing of argument and words as the learning soul travels into itself.

language, but is indifferent to the possibility that the emotional force of his mind may bring about a man's execution (*Conf.* I, XVIII [29]).

Yet even when immersed and enchanted by the power of rhetoric or the shadows of poetry, the grace of God shines through into this cave of learning, this Egyptian land of images, this union with the body, this underwater world of narcissistic separateness. Augustine recognises that even in frivolous games there is an urge for self-preservation, and this reveals a deeper and more profound unity at the centre of our being. In the dispersed pleasures of the senses there is something that holds delight together, in sinful enjoyment there is the reflected beauty of God's creation and image, in the attention to the details of the Poets there is a focusing on truth and the development of memory. In the lowest stages of learning the Divine Unity still reflects and reveals itself in the instinct we show for self preservation and the enjoyment we have of life, of making love in our dark corners. Yet this must not allow us to forget that the first level of education falls under the sign of sin, the sin of seeking pleasure, beauty and truth in creatures, not in the Creator, in self rather than in the great Other. It is an error that plunges us into misery and confusion that even the highest levels of education cannot remedy.

As Augustine moves from boyhood to adolescence, from Egypt to Canaan, he remains in the Cave of Shadows, in the love of creatureliness, blasphemously pink in the lust to unite with other bodies. He is still in a state of 'disintegration', having turned from unity in the One to the loss of multiplicity, burning with the desire for 'hellish pleasure', 'running wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures' (*Conf.* II, I [1]). Even this place is filled with Love, and all that Augustine really desired was 'simply to love and be loved', yet it is a region that confuses 'loves serenity and lust's darkness'. This submerged him in a 'whirlpool of vice', tossing him about, spilling him over into a seething sea of fornication (*Conf.* II, II [2]). A rhetorical education was useless in dealing with the power of these forces, and besides, manliness was encouraged so long as it came with an ability to speak effectively and convincingly. Augustine, like so many

adolescents, was in the mood to be seduced (*Conf.* II, III [8]), and all that a rhetorical education enabled was seduction in style.

Yet this mood carries within it an image of God, even when the wild years of adolescence manage to drink deeply of the lees. There are only gradations of goodness, and even the vilest act contains within it a shattered image of The Good and a desire for the beautiful (*Conf.* II, V [10]). There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.<sup>10</sup> So when a couple of the lads and a young Augustine steal pears for the sheer pleasure of theft and destroy them afterwards without bothering to eat them, Augustine searches for the aroma of God. Even in the leap down from the firmament into ruin there is a perverse imitation. In the case of stealing pears it was a desire for the love of friends manifesting in the need to conform and be together in a senseless act. It is always love that drives us along, yet in the world of the flesh, of Egypt and Canaan, of the Shadows, it is a love that has a distorted image, irredeemably cracked by the fall, leaving the learning soul as a 'region of destitution' (*Conf.* II, X [18]).

As Augustine shifted from adolescence into his student years, the need for Love did not abate, indeed the search for an object of love intensified – he 'longed to love' (*Conf.* III, I [1]). But it was a love that longed to be 'scratched by contact with the world of the senses' (*Conf.* III, I [1]). Even when celebrating the 'solemn rites within the walls of your Church, I even dared to lust after a girl and start an affair' (*Conf.* III, III [5]). Augustine was immersed in a desperate milk, drowning in the dooms of love. At the same time he loved theatre and the cathartic effects it generated within him, loved the imitators for their imitations and was seduced by them, crying when love was lost on the stage. Drunk on bodily forms in the shadows, Augustine found no respite in his higher studies, for it focused only on outward form, rewarding the ability to imitate the shadows of poetry, to argue convincing cases based on no internal merit, to deceive others through rhetorical

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<sup>10</sup> The last phrase is taken from Hopkins' great poem *God's Grandeur* in Hampl (1995) 32.

skill. It is in this state of unknowing desolation that Augustine, at the age of eighteen, came upon his first great influence that turned him around – Cicero’s *Hortensius*.

The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart. I began to rise up to return to you (*Conf.* III, IV [7]).

It was *what* Cicero said, rather than *how* he said it, that turned Augustine around from a union with the body and enjoyment of shadows towards union with spirit and entering the light. It instructed Augustine to look beyond particular manifestations of wisdom and begin the search for Wisdom herself – to love Wisdom (*philosophia*) in its purity. In entering the land of Chaldea, of seeing the images that cast shadows on the cave wall, grasping the nature of Universal Soul, Augustine begins to turn back to God after hitting the depths of empty materialism. Yet this crucial turn towards the light through Philosophy contains many dangers in the cornering. Philosophy is still only an image of Wisdom in ancient garb, dangerous for its ability to seduce the learning soul away from Christ, in whom dwells Wisdom in pure form. It is as fire is to the Sun. Philosophy is a handmaiden, to be entered and passed through on the path towards a pure unity of man and Christ, it is a prelude to the Song of Songs. Augustine speaks clearly of the nature of this danger, as he had found himself captured in these images through his attraction to the Manichees.<sup>11</sup> Like the astrologers of Chaldea, the Manichees fed Augustine’s hunger for

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<sup>11</sup> Mani, a travelling mystic in the third century, was radically dualistic in his conception of the world, dividing it up between good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and matter. Anything fleshly or earthly contaminated the spirit trapped in the corporeal body. Vegetarianism and celibacy were encouraged, but the main aim of all Mani’s practices was to liberate the divine spark deep buried deep within human fleshy existence. The central attraction of Manichee doctrine was its accounting for the origin of evil, a problem

the One, the Good, the True, with a 'diet of the sun and moon, your beautiful works', but as the Christian Augustine cries out after seeing through the image into the divine – 'but they are your works, not you yourself, nor indeed the first of your works. For priority goes to your spiritual creation rather than the physical order, however heavenly and full of light' (*Conf.* III, VI [10]). At this stage on the ladder of education, Augustine is still living outside himself, seeing only with a material eye, unable to contemplate the existence of another reality, a reality beyond the senses of the flesh, needing an opening of the spiritual senses to break him through into and beyond himself. This leaning outwards results in a search for physical pleasure, a honeyed gore,<sup>12</sup> a pride in one's own material unity, and a need to protect oneself in an egotistical manner, a protection that binds with chains of vanity and anxiety.

The converted Augustine looks back over his life as a young man between the age of nineteen and twenty eight, as a student and then teacher of the liberal arts, as an avid participator in the best of classical education, and all he can see is a life of 'being seduced and seducing, being deceived and deceiving' (*Conf.* IV, I [1]). He sold the art of rhetoric, teaching others how to use eloquence as a weapon of advantage. His private life was no better, divided between the peculiar practices of the Manichees (like eating fruit that contained the divine light, excluding apples of course) and the more intimate world of love and sex with his long time lover (with whom he had a child). All three passions

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that bedevilled the Christian belief in an omnipotent and divine God who surely could not be responsible for evil, but must be, given His all encompassing powers. Mani kept the goodness of God, but lost the omnipotence, resulting in an extraordinary vision of a universe filled with frightful cosmic battles between good and evil, forces of separate origin destined to clash until a final victor (good) emerged. Augustine finally found in Plotinus an explanation of evil that solved the conundrum – making evil the absence of God, nothing positive whatsoever. The Manichees were not stopped by Augustine's critique, however, and became popular as an alternative vision of Christianity, resulting in the Church's acrimonious branding of any dualist Christian sect as Manichean, to the point where it has become an insult. See S. Runciman's well balanced account in *The Medieval Manichee* (1982).

<sup>12</sup> The last phrase is Wallace Stevens' from his *Collected poems* (1945) 38.

would transform themselves as Augustine moved towards God. Rhetoric would always serve him well as can be witnessed in the eloquent conviction of his writing, but would be bent towards a higher purpose. The Manichees obsession with Good and Evil would transmutate into a Christian world of Grace and Sin, and his love of a woman and the physical would shift into a desire to see God face to face in a spiritual union. It is the path of this higher education that we must now chart, a path that begins once the liberal arts of rhetoric and dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy have been mastered, a path that steps up once a cultivated gentleman has been produced.

There has to be a clearing away, a radical questioning and cleansing of all that has been learnt and acquired before illumination and union with the Divine can occur. The example of analysing Astronomy provides an example of overcoming the heights reached by the liberal arts. How can Mars and Venus be responsible for adulteries, how can sinning be ordained and encouraged by heaven, how can the stars beam down to us our destinies, taking away from us the responsibility for our own faults? (*Conf.* IV, III [4]). This is the critique of reason, a seeing through the images that leads to scepticism. Then there is the critique of emotion – seeing into the mortality of existence – experienced through the death of a close friend.

‘Grief darkened my heart’ (Lam. 5: 17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death... My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything... I had become to myself a vast problem and I questioned my soul. Weeping had replaced my friend... I was in misery, and misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost. Then the soul becomes aware of the misery which is its actual condition even before it loses them (*Conf.* IV, IV [9] – VI [11]).

Augustine cries out in this place of unhappiness ‘What madness not to understand how to love human beings with awareness of the human condition’ (*Conf.* IV, VII [12]). Under the sign of death everything becomes an object of horror, everything leaks with decay,

smells putrid, grins with a skull, and the bells toll 'Vanity. Everything is Vanity'. To love such instability is masochistic, rather look for the stability within the flux.

But neither critique is strong enough on its own to bring transcendence. Augustine fled the place of a dead friend (Thagaste) for a place of many live friends (Carthage) – a relief only guaranteed to bring on sorrow proliferated, extending the myth and the lie by repetition and quantity, refusing the Eternal for a multiplication of the temporal. How can you seek a happy life in the region of death, how can there be a happy life where there is not even life? (*Conf.* IV, XII [18]). Whether one loves a single human being or many human beings, they are all in a state of passing. Whether one defines beauty in terms of balance, harmony or unity, it will fade, erode and wither. But looking backwards from conversion, scepticism is not an end point only a pruning before growth. Intellectual critique cannot do much more than provide a clearing of myth and false conceptions, and even then it threatens to replace false idols with its own image. The clearing instrument is itself flawed, and needs something higher and clearer than itself to ascend to the heights. Augustine gives the example of Aristotle's *Categories*, an intellectual way of penetrating into the pure categories of existence contained within everyday reality.

What help was this to me when the book was itself an obstacle? Thinking that absolutely everything that exists is comprehended under the ten categories, I tried to conceive you also, my God, wonderfully simple and immutable, as if you too were a subject of which magnitude and beauty are attributes. I thought them to be in you as if in a subject, as in the case of a physical body, whereas you yourself are your own magnitude and your own beauty (*Conf.* IV, XVI [29]).

Augustine, even with an experiencing of the emptiness of existence and a critique of myth, was still not out of the cave of shadows. His back was still turned to the Sun light, leaving him looking at the images lit up through the cave entrance with a gloomy face, his body a silhouette, dark to the light (*Conf.* IV, XVI [30]). Up to this point Augustine is describing an education that has occurred as if 'walking backwards'. He increasingly sees

more of what Light illuminates, but only as it reflects on material things, not turning around to look up at the Light directly. He is attempting to escape from the cave in a backward scramble that wanders around, desperately crashing into barriers not seen, excitedly noticing reflected beauty without being able to contemplate the cause. Only later will he recognise the hidden hand of God expertly guiding him into, and through the dangers. As a present experience, the reflected light entrances and seduces him with its widening beauty, leaving him longing for the echoed glory of fame, prestige, wealth and power.

The key lacuna in Augustine's classical education and mythical Manicheism was its inability to direct the learning soul inwards, towards non-material substance, to turn Augustine's gaze into his own being. He was able to critically assess the Manichees by comparing their views to other philosophers, resulting in a stage where he doubted everything. But this scepticism was not enough to heal the soul, only ruin illusions and leave a dubious human being in its wake. It is in this state that Augustine sacrifices his lover on the altar of secular ambition, shifting from the love of one body to that of institutions and the ideals they embody – 'honours, money, marriage' (*Conf.* VI, VI [9]). In order to pursue worldly success, it was necessary for Augustine to marry a wife who was rich and could support the initial heavy expenditure to gain a governorship, as well as offer the status of upper class urbanity. His consort and loved one of many years was unceremoniously sent back to Africa so that Augustine could marry a girl then only ten years old. In the two years that he needed to wait for her to reach the legal marrying age in Rome he took on another lover to satisfy his sexual urges. Much of the rest of his time was spent in avid discussion with his friends over the nature of Good and Evil. It is in this dissolute state – filled with the pleasures of the flesh, the ambition of the world, the words of the philosophers, the discourse of friends – that Augustine shifts onto the next level of learning.

To travel from Chaldea to Haran and the Wilderness, from shadows to the light, from physical beauty to the form of beauty, from union with the body to union of spirit, the

injunction is the same – turn around and look inwards. It is a command that shifts the learning soul from the outside to the inside, from the material to the spiritual, from the surface to the depths, from the time ridden to the timeless. Augustine followed the path as taught by Plotinus to go inwards and higher. Finally he had reached the path of true learning, a path that reached the divine by abstracting all physical, material, external things from the mind. Augustine's famous account of the journey begins as follows:

With you as my guide I entered my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper (Ps. 29: 11). I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind – not the light of everyday...nor a larger version...It was...a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. It transcended my mind...It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity: you are my God...What I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being (*Conf.* VII, X [16]).

This account, so dependent on Plotinus,<sup>13</sup> is stitched together in ways that differ radically from Neo-Platonism in two key areas. Firstly it is God that is guiding Augustine through the process as a teacher. With Plotinus it is a lonely ascent of the alone to the Alone. Secondly, Augustine gives an account of a recognition of inadequacy as a part of the experience. He sees Being, but recognises that he is not yet Being, he sees the Creator, but realizes at the same time that he is the created. There is no such sense of inadequacy in Plotinus, especially when he is in the non-dual state, for by definition, the non-dual

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<sup>13</sup> See the *Enneads* V, 1. 1; V, 3. 9; V, 3. 12; I, 6. 7; VI, 9. 9. Chadwick's superb translation continuously provides references to the *Enneads*, showing clearly the continual dependence of Augustine on Plotinus for describing the heights.

state precludes this recognition as a part of its structure. It would happen that after the experience of union, in the falling away, a sense of inadequacy was felt, but in that stellar moment, the Plotinian experience is that of Being, not seeing that 'I who saw am not yet Being'. Augustine is writing backwards towards the experience from a position of having 'transcended' the Plotinian account of ascent with a Christian conversion. This colours the account and makes it difficult for us to work out exactly how far Augustine travelled up the Plotinian path. Certainly, if Augustine was aware of his inferiority during the seeing of the Light then he had not travelled very far on the path to Union. A more sympathetic reading would be that he reached the Plotinian heights, but, after became aware of a deeper and more fundamental conversion, reinterpreted the non-dual experience in a Christian fashion, and included this awareness in his account. This is the key question that will occupy us over the rest of the chapter as it also indicates the divide that opened between the classical and medieval forms of higher learning. Put succinctly, to what extent was the Augustinian experience a critique, or a failure to fully reach, the Plotinian Union with the One? We will drift back to this question again and again as this chapter proceeds, but for now let us continue on the Augustinian path.

There were clear effects from Augustine seeing the Light<sup>14</sup> after ascending through a Plotinian causeway. Firstly, all doubt left Augustine about the nature of true Being, his tendency to work in objectified space and time was forever broken. His ability to comprehend the nature of the eternal radically improved (*Conf.* VII, X, [16]). Secondly he emerged with a phenomenological recognition that all existence is good, that evil is just the non-existence of good (*Conf.* VII, XII [18]). Thirdly he surfaced with an integral vision that saw things in terms of the Totality, not just in their own particularity. This resulted in a appreciation that all things are 'good' in their particularity, but taken

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<sup>14</sup> Balthasar (as per usual) provides an astounding account of the nature of Divine Light in his chapter on Augustine in *The Glory of the Lord* (vol. ii). God is the light itself by which the soul is illuminated and able to see things with true understanding. If the soul attempts to see the light itself, its created nature trembles with weakness, but it can be swept up to the light, seeing both sacred and profane in a new unity that transcends plurality (Balthasar vol ii: 98–99).

together are 'very good' (*Conf.* VII, XII [18]). He no longer wished individual things to be better because within the view of Totality it held a place. He had developed a sounder judgement (*Conf.* VII, XIII [19]). Augustine woke up in God, everything held together in a new light, beauty bloomed on existence, all of existence sang out their creation, a new harmony held. Yet it was the fourth effect that held the most weight for Augustine. Like Plotinus (*Enneads* VI, 9. 4) he found himself descending from the heights of mystical Union back into the everyday. He could not stabilize himself on this level. After being caught up in Beauty he collapsed outwards, towards himself, into inferior things, specifically into his own bodily desires (*Conf.* VII, XVII [23]). The Plotinian excursion had enabled him to glimpse the heights, but not to stay there. Augustine provides his own summary of the path.

[S]tep by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations... From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence, and led my thinking out of the ruts of habit. It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable... So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your invisible nature... But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition (*Conf.* VII, XVII [23]).

This was unsatisfactory for Augustine. To catch a glimpse of the goal of highest learning, but not have the strength to stay there, to see the end but not live in its realm added cruelty to the taste of divinity. It was in this state that he began to read the Bible (especially Paul) and found that the Christian experience contained all the truth of the Neo-Platonists but added a crucial dimension, a healing dimension, a dimension that

enabled the broken person to hold onto God – the dimension of the Saviour. In Christ there is an account of redemption, of confession, of sacrifice and humility, of caring love – an account desperately needed by a man who had ascended to the furthest heights of learning only to find himself crashing down because of his own inadequacy.

The issue facing Augustine at this stage on the learning path towards God was not to be clearer on the nature of God but to be more stable within God given his corrupt and indecisive nature. It is in dealing with this issue of how a flawed human being handles insight into the Divine that Augustine finds his true voice. When listening to an account of a friend about his own conversion to God through reading about St Antony's life in the desert, Augustine came upon his own desert.

You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself and you set me before my face so that I could see how vile I was... And I looked and was appalled, but there was no way of escaping from myself...; you thrust me before my own eyes, so that I should discover my iniquity and hate it (*Conf.* VIII, VII [16]).

In the twelve years passed since reading *Hortensius* Augustine had put off a full commitment to the quest for Wisdom. His cry, so famous, rings out in our own experience – 'not yet', I know it's the right way, but allow me some leeway to enjoy the lusts of life for a while, to complete the dark confessions my veins spell. This time of dabbling had come to an end. Faced with the account of another's conversion, Augustine was filled with loathing of himself. Withdrawing to a garden he began to struggle with himself, yet found to his horror that as much as he attempted to will himself into conversion it would not happen. All he needed was a strong, unqualified will to convert and then the grace of God would take over, yet he could not will himself to will, for this was the very instrument needed, and it was not responding to the cry of his soul (*Conf.* VIII, VIII [20]). He could will his body to tear his hair out, but his mind would not listen to his mind. The order from his mind to obey his mind was not listened to. There was a

failure of will. Again and again Augustine chanted to himself 'Let it be now, let it be now', almost to make the decision and then falling back, getting closer and closer to his goal, but still hearing the whisper of his 'old loves' tugging at him. In the most profound of self-examinations, faced with the enormity of his inadequacy, 'a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears' resulted, and as Augustine wept he heard a child repeating the following phrase in the distance 'Pick up and read'. He went to his bible, picked it up, randomly opened it and read 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (*Conf.* VIII, XI [29]). With these words relief floods through Augustine, anxiety leaves him, and peace opens out in him. God had descended and helped him out of his misery through the Grace of his Son, lifting him from a peek at the Divine, into the Divine Word itself. Beauty infuses his soul.

Afterwards, Augustine could reflect on the experience and see that the nub of the problem 'was to reject my own will and desire yours' (*Conf.* IX, I [I]). In God's will he found it easy to turn away from the flesh, found the brightest and most inward of Lights, found himself free of lust, indulgence and pride. With Origen he can cry out to God – 'You pierced my heart with the arrow of your love'. Union with Christ had occurred. It is from this position that Augustine looks back at the heights of Classical learning, symbolized by Plotinus, and sees its crucial failure – its working in the realm of the same rather than of difference. Human beings did not carry the divine as a part of them, to be worked upon and polished in a solitary ascent forever inward and upward. Humanity is a part of creation, not a part of the Creator, created in a likeness, in imitation, never able to reach over the chasm that separates the eternal self-same from the time-ridden traveller<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> There is a continual danger of overemphasizing the personal nature of the journey of the learning soul towards a purer likeness of God, because of the individual and inner focus of its work. For Augustine (as for Origen) this journey must occur within the Church, which offers support, guidance, ritual, symbol, music, and most importantly the premier place to separate from the flesh and arrive at the House of God (see *Homily on Psalm 41*). As the gap between Creator and created widened, the need for ritual increased as a way of bridging the divide.

God, in his grace and mercy could reach down and bless humanity with an experience of Divinity but in the reaching of man inside himself all he could find was an image of the divine, never the Divine itself. The best a mortal could do was polish and perfect the image. To think that man could save himself, or was already divine, was the most fundamental of mistakes. Everything relied on the Grace of God as Augustine had experienced it in a Milanese garden, of God reaching down from the Infinite and touching. It was now incumbent on Augustine to rework the whole classical spectrum from its depths to its heights in a way that reconfigured it towards a world of Sin and Grace, towards the experience of his own conversion.

Before we go into an analysis of how Augustine reconfigured the stages of higher learning, let us look at an experience he had after conversion that was similar to his Neo-Platonic Union with the One and begin to look for developments. It happens with his Mother shortly before her death, so it is unusual in that it is a joint non-dual experience, already a radical deviation from Plotinus. Looking out onto a garden in Ostia, talking about the nature of eternal life, they found themselves lifted up into a brief tasting of it. By now the stages should look familiar:

Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. There life is wisdom by which all creatures come into being... But wisdom itself is not brought into being but is as it was and always will be... And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left behind us 'the first fruits of the spirit' (Rom. 8: 23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending (*Conf.* IX, X [24]).

This account of ascending through stages towards the Divine is immediately buttressed with an account of how to get there, what to do, what the conditions of possibility are.

Therefore we said: If to anyone the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent, if the images of earth, water, and air are quiescent, if the heavens themselves are shut out and the very soul itself is making no sound and is surpassing itself by no longer thinking about itself, if all dreams and visions in the imagination are excluded, if all language and every sign and everything transitory is silent – for if anyone could hear them, this is what all of them would be saying, ‘We did not make ourselves, we were made by him who abides for eternity’ (Ps. 79: 3, 5) – if after this declaration they were to keep silence, having directed our ears to him that made them, then he alone would speak not through them but through himself. We would hear his word, not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of a symbolic utterance. Him, who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation. That is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things (*Conf.* IX, X [25]).

Apart from the joint nature of the non-dual experience, it is noticeable that Augustine again follows the pattern (and even the images and words) of Plotinus in *Enneads* V, 1. 2. 14 and V, 1. 2. 14. But what we have so far is only an account of what the stages are, not a phenomenological description of what actually happens when one enters the citadel of one’s own mind in search of Wisdom. What actually happens when engaging in this form of highest learning, what does it look like from the inside? It is to this great project that Augustine dedicates the rest of *Confessions* and it is really only after examining this that a full analysis can be made of the shift that occurs in him from the ‘classical’ to the ‘medieval’.

If Augustine had lusted after the fruits of the flesh, loved individual bodies, longed for worldly success, what was it now that he loved after conversion? It is clear that he wakes up in a sea of beauty, both outer and inner, with a garden in his mouth. The natural world becomes a spiritual house, its outline becomes clear and fills with colour.<sup>16</sup> All of creation is lit up in beauty, sounded with sweet melody,<sup>17</sup> tasted in gentle odours, felt in

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<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire's poem *Intimate Associations* is worked in over here. I find in Baudelaire the great modern expression of what Augustine is rendering in Medieval Christian terms. Baudelaire's experience of the nature of time and space within himself, of the failure of will, of being caught between extremes in the most human of ways all finds resonances in Augustine – but transformed into the most modern of conditions. For an essay that reveals the similarities and differences between Baudelaire and Augustine I strongly recommend Poulet's astonishingly insightful essay in Peyre's *Baudelaire: a collection of critical essays* (1962) 132–149. I am sorry that this thesis was already too long to carry out this most necessary of tasks and push into modern expressions of the depths and heights of Being, but here is a part of the poem I used.

Man walks there through forests of physical things that are also spiritual things,  
That watch him with affectionate looks.

As the echoes of great bells coming from a long way off  
Become entangled in a deep and profound association,  
A merging as huge as night, or as huge as clear light,  
Odours and colours and sounds all mean – each other.

(Washburn and Major [1998] 758)

We will meet with this experience again and again through these chapters – Dante will experience it on top of Purgatory, Shakespeare will dramatize it with his flower maidens and their suggestion of infinite things. There is a real danger of entering such a world too soon and being unable to sustain it in an effective and productive manner, as is powerfully demonstrated in the decadent lives of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine who all drowned in the sea of beauty. The significance of the tales of this thesis is that they show how to enter and sustain this state within an integrated framework.

<sup>17</sup> Balthasar points to Augustine's great love of music and the manner in which it imitates the beauty of the One on the level of the not-one.

comforting embraces, but this is not what Augustine loves most. Now he finds within himself a place floodlit by light, sounds beyond hearing, a perfume clear of dispersal, a union that can never be exhausted, he finds God within as his spiritual senses open up (*Conf. X, VI* [8]). Wrapped in this light he begins an inward exploration, coming to ‘the fields and vast palaces of memory...a vast and infinite profundity’ (*Conf. X, VIII* [12, 15]). In this vast hall he comes across all of existence as he has experienced it, including himself. Like God the Father is the originator and ‘container’ of all existence, so is the Memory to us. Augustine begins to wake to his own immensity. But we cannot grasp this totality of what we are. In the inward journey we find an infinite world of astounding complexity, one that even remembers that it forgets. It has immeasurable diversity, filled with images and skills, notions, impressions, emotions of infinite range and depth – all of this is contained in memory. Augustine is stunned by the complex beauty of such a force in a mortal human being, but recognises that he must transcend even this infinity within himself, climbing up through his mind to that which is always Being. Effectively he has begun to explore a ‘spatial’ infinity within himself, an infinity similar to the Godhead, but inferior to it. In immersing him-self in this eternal space within his-self, he recognises his similarity to God, of how exactly he has been created in the Image of God, in falling into the infinity within himself, he begins to get an image of what it is to be Divine.<sup>18</sup> As he goes through this process he comes out with the most poetic summary of the *Confessions*

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The element of painful melancholy which is present in all music because the totality can be grasped only in the flight of its parts.... [W]orldly ethics ... sins against the meaning of fleeting beauty when it tries to hold on to the individual note instead of allowing the quantitative to slip away as one sways to the rhythm of beauty. Yes, the beauty of material bodies is real beauty: there is nothing evil in it, but it is only a trace and a hint pointing one away from the non-existent to the existent (Balthasar vol ii: 119–120).

<sup>18</sup> The closer the learning soul gets to its pure likeness to God, the more it struggles to articulate the experience, language begins to break down. This should not result in silence as words fail but rather a jubilant attempt to express the impossible. Much as Sarah was encouraged to laugh in the presence of the Divine, so Augustine refused the path of silence and pours out humble but ecstatic praise. As he puts it in *On Christian Doctrine*:

Late have I loved you,  
beauty so old and so new:  
late have I loved you.  
And see,  
you were within and I  
was in the external world and sought you there,  
and in my unlovely state  
I plunged  
into those lovely created things which you made.  
You were with me and I  
was not with you.  
The lovely things  
kept me far from you,  
though if they did not have their existence in you,  
they had no existence at all.  
You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.

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Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than to be resolved verbally. For God, although nothing worthy may be spoken of him, has accepted the tribute of the human voice and wished us to take joy in praising him with our words (*On Christian Doctrine* I, VI. 6).

The difficulty of expressing the inexpressible was fully squared up to by Pseudo Dionysius, resulting in a *negative dialectical* path of the learning soul to the Divine, a path already adequately described by Plotinus so I will not go into it in detail.

You were radiant and resplendent,  
 you put to flight my blindness.  
 You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath  
 and now pant after you.  
 I tasted you,  
 and I feel but hunger and thirst for you.  
 You touched me,  
 and I am set on fire to attain the peace  
 which is yours.

(*Conf. X, XXVII [38] line spacing my own*)

This beautiful passage, rightly famous, captures in essence the theme of the journey of the learning soul towards God, resonating with Plato, Origen and Plotinus in complex ways, picking up on Love imagery of the *Symposium* and *Song of Songs* in a Neo-Platonic fashion, but mutating it into a Christian recognition of a God who is with us, even though we are not with him. It is not without cause that Augustine sits near the fountainhead of the Christian tradition.

The infinite space within us is one mode of appreciating how we have been created in the image of God, another is the infinity of 'time'. We clearly exist in a world of arising and falling, of coming and going, a world of time. If we ask the question of creation, of how we came to be, then the register shifts from that space inside us so similar to God the Father, to how creation happened in the Word, or the Son. We begin to see that Augustine is opening us out to the image of the Trinity inside us, of how we are made in the likeness of the Father, the Son and the Gift of the Holy Spirit. His project of reconfiguring Higher Learning is not only a rethinking of the same in terms of difference, but also of rethinking this difference in terms of the Trinity rather than the One – a vast and complex project.

Augustine attempts to get us towards an experience of timelessness within ourselves by exploring the timelessness of the Beginning, of the Word.<sup>19</sup> If we ask what word God spoke when making heaven and earth, we have to come to the conclusion that it occurred before there was time and space, for that is what got made by the Word, which existed before heaven and earth, time and space. There was no time and space for the Word to exist in when it ‘spoke’ so we have to get out of the conception of a speaking that begins and ends, that allows succession and conclusions, and try to imagine everything being said in the simultaneity of eternity (*Conf.* XI, VII [9]). The Beginning always was, it is only our experience of it that makes it into a beginning in time and space. The attempt to understand and experience the nexus between Eternity and Time, captured in our relationship to the Word, fills Augustine with terror and burning love: ‘with terror inasmuch as I am utterly other than it, with burning love in that I am akin to it (*Conf.* XI, IX [11]). Although he is following Plotinus closely over here (*Enneads* V, 5. 9; VI, 5. 7; I, 6. 7) Augustine has a different phenomenological experience to Plotinus in the *terror* of being utterly other to Eternity. For Plotinus there is no terror, for we are already always that Eternity, we just have to look within. The difference between the Divine and the learning soul slowly widens to a chasm with Augustine, resulting in a whole range of different techniques to deal with the Divide, a theme which will occupy much of the rest of this chapter.

Augustine doubts his own ability to convey the splendour of eternity to a learner steeped in time. For us we experience a past driven further and further back by an approaching future, and a future that never comes unless it is past. Augustine wants to get us to the still point that dictates future and past times, for in this we will come to experience the

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<sup>19</sup> I follow Augustine’s account in *Confessions* in the main text for the sake of continuity, but the full account is astoundingly given in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Here Augustine point out that the whole of creation happened simultaneously, for it occurred before time. Time was made by creation. The reason for the 6 days of creation is that it displays the hierarchy of being in the Universe and dramatizes the creation of God. Impossible to summarize in a footnote but see Augustine’s own summary in Book II, 8. 19 and Book IV, 22–3.

Word that is in the Beginning. To do this Augustine looks at the three modes of time talked about in ordinary language and shows that none of them actually exist. The past is not now present, and the future is not yet present. That leaves the present, but it is not always present, for if it was it would not pass into the past, it would not be time but eternity (*Conf.* XI, XIV [17]). This present time can be infinitely divided between the past it was and a waiting future, becoming a space so small that it obliterates itself in the running between. It is only an edge, a razor that cuts emptiness. Yet it is in this that we work, and it gains extension by holding within itself an image of the past and an image of a future – a past that is remembered in the present and a future that is anticipated in the present. It is our memory that gives us Time. This present that we hold onto is fragile and insubstantial, narrowed to a point by the great bareness of past and future pressing in from both sides, but stretched out on the rack of our memory, holding on inside itself to a past present and a future present. Yet both of these ‘times’ are non-existent in the present, the one has already gone, and the other never arrives. If we drop both apparitions, we are left with a present so divisible that it collapses within itself to an infinitely thin edge. Yet, Augustine cries out, we still experience time as long and short, we still talk of a future and a past as though they exist (*Conf.* XI, XXVII [34]). It is the mind that measures time, that holds onto impressions and projects schemes. Augustine wants this recognition to sink home. He speaks to his own mind as only someone who has explored its workings in detail can.

So it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time. Do not distract me: that is, do not allow yourself to be distracted by the hubbub of the impressions being made upon you. In you, I affirm, I measure periods of time. The impression which passing events make upon you abides when they are gone. That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it (*Conf.* XI, XXVII [36]).

To talk of a long future, is to hold in present attention an idea of a long future. To think of a long past, is to hold in present consciousness an idea of a long past. Augustine feels

himself distended on the rack of his own mind, stretching his soul outwards into a future and a past that exists only in his consciousness, tortured by an illusion, captured in a cave of shadows.<sup>20</sup> It is an experiencing of a disintegration into successiveness, a loss of the still point in a welter of past and future spectres. He longs to become like the Son, the Word, to continuously be In The Beginning. He desires to break the chains of the past and not move towards an illusory future. He wishes a state in which all his concentration is given to the things that are before him, a present consciousness that is timeless, because it exists in the focused appreciation of the eternal present (*Conf. XI, XXIX [39]*). This is a place that neither comes nor goes, but stays within a radical present, a present that holds a future and a past within it, but only as a shadow that has no grip. Here infinity threads itself with itself. Again, Augustine is picking up on the cadences of Plotinus in his vision of the timeless state (*Enneads VI, 6. 1*). And again, what Plotinus held to be a state achievable in the highest of the learning stages, Augustine sees as impossible in this life, something only achieved after death when ‘purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge with you’ (*Conf. XI, XXIX [39]*). Augustine has been thrust far away from this profound experience by the consequences of his sins, he feels the tension between past and future in his present activity, he feels the depth of the chasm between his own created, temporal state and the Divinity of Eternity, he feels the difficulty of entering the transparent door of eternity in every moment. Even

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<sup>20</sup> Augustine provides a wonderful example of this in an analysis of what happens to him as he recites from his favourite source – the Psalms.

Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is directed towards the whole. But when I have begun, the verses from it which I take into the past become the object of my memory. The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say. But my attention is on what is present: by that the future is transferred to become the past. As the action advances further and further, the shorter the expectation and the longer the memory, until all expectation is consumed, the entire action is finished, and it has passed into the memory. What occurs in the psalm as a whole occurs in its particular pieces and its individual symbols.... It is also valid of the entire life of an individual person...and of the total history of...men (*Confessions XI, XXVIII [38]*).

a brief experience of the Still Point will not capture the astounding profundity of a God able to work the nexus between Eternity and Time without losing Infinity. All Augustine can do is look on in wonder at the profundity of such a state. He might have an inkling of what it is to truly BE in the infinity inside of him, but it pales in comparison to the Uncreated Infinity of God.

If we come to an Image of the Divine Father through our experiencing of infinite 'space' within us, and an Image of the relationship between the Father and Son through infinite 'time', what of the image of the Holy Spirit in us? Before we come to this most complex of questions, we still have to look at the result of the relationship between Son and Father on us, the result of creation. We have explored what it is to Be in pure terms, now we have to explore the effects of Being. We come to knowledge, to *reflection on Being*, we come to the pouring out of the One into creation, to the interface between the Word and its effects. Except now the Plotinian account of efflux is radically altered by God creating this material world of existence not out of himself, but out of Nothing. The golden stream that runs from beginning to end in the Ancients is shattered by the radical difference between Being and creation out of Nothing based on an image of Being. Two fundamentally different substances arise, Uncreated and created (*Conf. XII, VII [7]*). The created was made out of formless Matter that in turn was made out of Nothing by God. The created now exists in a separate spectrum of possibilities, ranging from how near it is to Being to how far away it is. At best, it is the Heaven of heavens, an Intellectual World that contemplates God continuously, capable of existing face to Face with God, never distracted or deflected, living in a timeless contemplation, married to the Bridegroom in Love, being as close to eternity as mutability can be. At the bottom end of the scale it is the empty formlessness of matter, the stuff out of which things are made, timelessly existing in the empty darkness of extension without form. As human beings we exist in this stuff, *becoming* an image of Being, reaching for the Heaven of heavens,<sup>21</sup> but never *being* Being in its fullness. We are, and always will be, dark matter lit up in reflection towards the Divine, dependent on his Grace for warmth (*Conf. XII, XV [21]*). We exist in

time between the empty timelessness of grey matter, and the full timelessness of pure contemplation in the Heaven of heavens, but never as the Uncreate. Augustine lifts the Word into the One, and leaves us on the other side, always destined to imitate. With Origen the un-fallen bride and Bridegroom were on the same level, immersed in God. With Augustine, the Bridegroom lifts into the Godhead and loves us from an irreducible distance that is that between Creator and created, Grace and sin. the Word is coeternal, the Face of God turned towards creation, we are a replica of this relationship – our *being* turning around and *knowing* itself as being – just as it is through the Word that God the Father comes to ‘know’ himself (although in an eternal relationship this effectively means that God always knew himself utterly). It is not that we pursue a path of higher learning, uniting with the Word as our Lover and Guide to the Father, now the relationship of Union between the Word and the Father has an analogous (and inferior) relationship inside ourselves. Something has radically altered in the Augustinian path of learning, for although it too goes inwards and upwards, it never crosses the gorge of analogy. We are not Divine, never were Divine, never will be Divine.<sup>22</sup> At our best, in the Heaven of heavens, we worship the Divine in whose image we are made, never being Divine. Grace can restore our fallen nature to its pristine state, but that pristine state was always stamped with CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF THE TRINITY on its deepest and innermost core. This may be good, but it is not Divine. The inward turn is vital for Augustine, for only there do we find the clearest intimation of what it is to be God, although it is not the Divine itself inside, but his image. We are paraphrases of God.

In the turning around and entering our own infinity, we have our *being* as remembered in Memory, and the looking at this being, let us call it *knowledge* of being. There must also be a force that turns being around to look into itself. There must be a *will* to turn around,

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<sup>22</sup> ‘You did not make creation out of yourself in your own likeness, the form of all things, but out of nothing, which is formless dissimilarity to, though, nevertheless, given form through your likeness. So it returns to you, the One, according to the appointed capacity granted to each entity according to its genus... To the limited extent that they can grasp the light of your truth in this life those who see these things rejoice (*Conf. XII, XXVIII* [38]).

and here we have the secret to the third mode of the Trinity and how it reflects itself inside of us.<sup>23</sup> God's Will is something different to ours. We can have a failure of will, as Augustine so painfully experienced, something that does not happen with God, his Will is identical with his Self (*Conf.* XII, XXVIII [38]). It is our will that attempts to turn us around and begin the journey of the learning soul towards the Light, but it is only through the gift of God's Will that we have the strength to fully commit to, and continue on, the path, it is only in God's Will that our will is strong enough. This gift of God that lifts us towards him is Love in its pure Form.<sup>24</sup> Here Augustine closely follows Plotinus' description of a wave of love lifting us up into the One (*Enneads* VI, 8. 1), but the language that follows is biblical.

We climb 'the ascents of our heart' (Ps. 119:1) and sing 'the song of steps' (Ps. 119:1). Lit by your fire...we grow red hot and ascend, as we move upwards 'to the peace of Jerusalem' (Ps. 121:6) (*Conf.* XIII, IX [10]).

We begin to see, in outline, the reconfiguration of Higher Learning that Augustine is undertaking based on the Trinitarian One. The goal of becoming 'like God', the great aim of ancient higher learning, has just tripled its complexity and widened the gap. To fully comprehend the majesty of his attempt to rework the path of learning we have to turn to one of his other great works – *On The Trinity*.<sup>25</sup> It is here that we find Augustine

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<sup>23</sup> 'I wish that human disputants would reflect upon the triad within their own selves. These three aspects of the self are very different from the Trinity... The three aspects I mean are being, knowing, willing. For I am and I know and I will. Knowing and willing I am. I know that I am and I will. I will to be and to know' (*Conf.* XIII, XI [12]).

<sup>24</sup> The work of the Holy Spirit is specifically that of Love. It heals the damaged soul so that a turning towards God can occur and continue within the walls of the church. The strengthening of the Will occurs in the love it feels towards God and all of His creation, creating an increasing desire to return to the Bosom of Christ. It is in the sea of Love that we begin to see God more clearly. Love and knowledge combine, but it is always Love that leads the way and provides the groundswell (*De Trin.* VIII, 9. 13).

attempting to sketch out in detail what the Trinity is, and then how various images of the Trinity are found in us in the most formal of terms. It is an extended and austere pedagogical exercise, for in its heights education's task is to draw the learning soul upwards into the clearest possible likeness to God. We will leave the complex debates Augustine entered into with other schools of thought on the Trinity and begin where our own focus lies – the journey of a learning soul – except now the task is not to illuminate ancient visions of the path, or use Augustine's life as a useful summation and critique of the path, but to see how Augustine abstractly reconstructed the path on the axis of difference rather than through the spectrum of sameness. The full journey of the learning soul described so beautifully by Plotinus, exists in its entirety for Augustine as an Image of God, as a journey that discovers within a likeness to Divinity. It is as though Augustine holds up a mirror to Plotinus and finds in the mystical heights of his journey of the solitary to the Solitary a reflection of God. Things double for Augustine, there is not a continuum from Matter to Divinity, rather an image of Divinity in Matter and then Divinity itself. As many mirrors as there are in Plotinus, they are permeable, the essence carries through them all, the Breath pervades, the Light holds. In Augustine, there are two worlds of radical difference, with only imitation of the First by the Second being possible. It is not possible to step through the looking glass, except by extrapolation, guess work and divine Grace, and even then the vision granted is always coloured by the stuff of creation. It is only by contemplating our own depths that we can gain a vague image of the Other World. A more direct contemplation, face to Face, will have to await another dispensation, and even then, createdness will still leave a gap, however subtle. So it is to the image within that we must go, to the paraphrase of the Word.

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<sup>25</sup> I work from the excellent translation of Edmund Hill. It comes stocked with superb notes and introduction from a clear master in Augustine's thought. *On the Trinity* provides a formal account of what the *Confessions* do phenomenologically, much like the relationship between Plato's *Parmenides* and the *Republic*, or Hegel's *Logic* and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

### **Journey of the alone into the Trinity**

In order for this Image within to be like the Trinity, it must be of one substance and coequal as well as distinct and mutually related. The image must be of One as Three and Three as One, only here will the learning soul find its true likeness to the Divine. The only accessible place such a phenomenon exists for the learning soul is in its own mind, for as one substance it has three distinct aspects – its being as mind (memory), its looking at itself as mind (knowledge), and the force of mind that facilitates the turning around of mind to look as itself (will).<sup>26</sup> It would seem that the famous Delphic injunction to ‘know thyself’ is more complex than initially thought. Augustine elaborates on the highest of pedagogical maxims by examining its first difficulty:

So now then, in considering how the mind is to look for itself and find itself, we are faced with a very odd question: where does it go to look for, and where does it come in order to come upon itself? What after all can be as much in the mind as mind? But it is also in the things that it thinks about with love, and it has got used to loving sensible, that is bodily things; so it is unable to be itself without their images. Hence arises its shameful mistake, that it cannot make itself out among the images of the things it has perceived with the senses, and see itself alone; they are stuck astonishingly fast together with the glue of love (*De Trin. X, 3. 11*).

The first error to overcome when turning around and going into the mind is to mistake its images for itself. When doing this the mind is actually absent from itself, it has

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<sup>26</sup> Put in rigorous form, the equation runs itself out as follows:

I remember that I have memory and understanding and will, and I understand that I understand and will and remember, and I will that I will and remember and understand, and I remember my whole memory and understanding and will all together...Therefore since they are each and all, and each and all equal to all of them together, and these three are one, one life, one mind, one being (*De Trin. X, 4. 18*).

‘forgotten’ itself in the looking, for it is looking at the results of looking, not at what does the looking itself. A successful entering into what the mind is without images, into what it is that allows images to form, is the proper knowing of oneself as Descartes will again demonstrate in over a thousand years time within a different framework. When this happens the learning soul realizes that there never was a time when it did not love itself or know itself. It is a shock of recognition, a seeing of that in you that allows seeing to happen. It was always there, *because you always saw*, but you forgot about what allows you to see in the seeing, got wrapped up in the images rather than in what allows the images to arise. It is to this place before images that Augustine wants to go, this place that has always been active in us even though we have forgotten about it, this place that contains the purest image of the Trinity. ‘Let the mind then not go looking for a look at itself as if it were absent, but rather take pains to tell itself apart as *present*’ (*De Trin.* X, 3. 12 my emphasis).

In turning around to this inner light, do not get wrapped up in academic debates about the nature of the mind, Augustine warns, rather stay focused on the experience itself, on the purity of mind (*De Trin.* X, 3. 13). Do not worry about whether it is fire, water, air (or a computer), stay with what the mind is to itself. In lines that carry through to a Cartesian generation<sup>27</sup> he argues—

Nobody surely doubts... that he lives and remembers and understands and wills and thinks and knows and judges. At least, even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he is doubting; if he doubts, he understands he is doubting; if he doubts, he has a will to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows he does not know; if he doubts; he judges he ought not to give hasty assent. You may have your doubts about anything else, but you should not

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<sup>27</sup> *Si fallor, sum* (If I am mistaken, I am) contrasted to *Cogito, ergo sum* (thanks to a footnote [25 of book X] of Hill). A detailed comparison of the nature of entering into the nature of the first person in Augustine and Descartes can be found in Mathews’ *Thought’s ego in Augustine and Descartes* (1992).

have doubts about these; if they were not certain, you would not be able to doubt anything (*De Trin.* X, 3. 14).

The mind as being, knowing and willing is at the heart of education for Augustine, building up from an elementary sensory picture into its luminous reflection of the Trinity. It underlies the basics of preliminary studies. When examining the *disposition* of a child to learn, his *actual learning*, and his *practice* of this learning, the three features of mind, its being, knowing and willing, stand out as key evaluatory criteria. A teacher looks at what a child is capable of in terms of memory, understanding, and willingness to learn when working out a pupil's disposition. In terms of actual learning, the teacher looks at what is in the child's memory, what he understands, and how he has got to that point in learning. When looking at practice the teacher looks at the will with which the pupil applies what he has memorized and understood (*De Trin.* X, 4. 17). We begin with a model of the Trinity in our relationship with the world and our primary education, a vague trinity (as it is based on material things) and then slowly progress towards finer and finer approximations of the Divine as learning reaches for the inward heights. So let us start with the outside and work our way inwards as we follow Augustine's educational path for the learning soul.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The path from the outside to the inside is also the ascent of a hierarchy that goes from sheer existence (which even a stone has), to life which even an animal has, to understanding which only human beings (on earth) have. Augustine poses the following question to us – Which of these three seems the best? – and I will follow Balthasar superb summary.

[T]he answer, 'Understanding,' is justified as follows: 'because even a stone has existence and even an animal has life, but the stone is not alive and the animal does not think, so then if someone thinks, it is absolutely certain that he also exists and is alive (*De libero arbitrio* 2. 7). Nothing is more fundamental in Augustine than the hierarchical character of the primary intuition about being...; it is an attempt to find a place for the most fundamental order of being in the world within the original act of consciousness... It is a law which determines both the intensification and the foundation of existence. 'To be in order to be alive, to be alive in order to understand (*Soliloquia* 2. 1).' There is in the *cogito* that which is fundamentally self-evident to the eye of the

The most obvious and concrete relationship we have is with the world of sensation. It is our outward opening to the light of the world. Firstly there is a whole world of objects out there that are open to being sensed, to being looked at. Secondly, in looking, a likeness of the object is impressed on our sense of sight. Thirdly, there is an act of will that focuses sight on object, that brings the two together (*De Trin.* XI, 1). There are three different substances here, outside world, sensation, and will held together in a single act.

Augustine wants to get closer to a trinity that is of one substance having three different modes, and that substance being immaterial, like the Divine. Staying with the outer man (our relationship with the world), Augustine next explores the option of us remembering an event in recollection. Here we still have an act of will, but now it joins together the *minds* eye to an image stored in memory. We imagine what the outside object looks like by getting our mind to look into its own store of images of the outside world. So we have two trinities of the outward man – one of sensation and one of imagination. Both are reliant on the outside world for the initial images, although the second trinity is a progression in that it is now one substance, mind, looking at itself. It is the gaze of thought looking at images of the world inside of itself (*De Trin.* XI, 2). It is a refrain we come to again and again, whether in the soliloquies of Shakespeare, the meditations of Descartes, or the phenomenology of Husserl. Here it is still far away from divinity in that what is looked at is creation, not the Creator. For Augustine there is nothing wrong with either of these relationships so long as they are continually referred upwards to their source, to God, so long as we do not wallow in the material and forget the spiritual. To begin the song of steps upwards we have to turn towards our inner man, that part of us that is not turned to the light outside but to the light inside. It is as if we are a tube with two openings, two worlds of light pouring into us, the everyday world that is easy to see,

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mind: the recognition of precedence, a preference for the higher and better which entails a risk and a choice: It dares to put itself first (Balthasar vol ii: 107).

There is a fourth level that incorporates existence, living and understanding in a transcendent illumination of Being that goes beyond all three and makes them possible. It is this hierarchy that ascends as we go inwards that Augustine is attempting to point us towards.

and an internal radiance open to God deep in our minds. Augustine has explored how we are open to the exterior world in a way that is modelled vaguely on the Trinity, now he has to open out the world of interior illumination and thus get closer to the image of God within us.

Just as there are two parts to the outer man – sensation and imagination – so are there two parts to the inner man, knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is the part of the mind that controls and directs the sensations and imaginations coming to it from the outside man, either doing an effective job of it through the virtues of courage, sagacity, justice and moderation, or falling into selfish enjoyment (*De Trin.* XII, 4. 22). Wisdom is that part of the mind closest to contemplating the Light of the Divine, furthest away from the shadowy light of sensation and the images it brings. It is fully directed upwards to the Form in their purity and the Divine light illuminating them. As Augustine puts it ‘Wisdom is concerned with the intellectual cognisance of eternal things and knowledge with the rational cognisance of temporal things (*De Trin.* XII, 4. 25). The final goal of higher learning is finally in sight. It is the Wisdom that comes from awareness alone, awareness without the sensations, images and reasons that attach themselves so lovingly to its openness.

It is at this point that the massive debt Augustine feels in his conversion to God in a Milan Garden comes bursting through. As much as it is possible to clarify this path towards an image of God, learners do not have the strength to get there on their own. They might know where happiness lies, but do not want to travel the path to get there, at least not yet. For the faithful who do not get to this point of wisdom there is always faith that immortal happiness awaits them after death. This is not fully satisfactory for Augustine however, he is looking for an image of the Trinity in us, and as faith will *fade away* when the learning soul finally gets to the Heaven of heavens, it does not capture the unchanging nature of the Trinity imaged in us. Faith might be necessary to begin the

inward journey<sup>29</sup> towards that reflection inside us so similar and distant from God, but its transient nature means that it does not describe our actual relationship to the Divine as it will be in the Heaven of heavens (*De Trin.* XIV, 1. 4), nor as it is captured in its purity inside us. As Augustine puts it ‘What we have to find in the soul of man, that is the rational and intellectual soul, is an image of the creator which is immortally engrained in the soul’s immortality’ (*De Trin.* XIV, 1. 5).

In the purity of the mind – without the accrual of sensations, images, the techniques of reason, and the scaffolding of faith – we find one substance that has always been the open clearing that allowed sensations, images, reasons and faith to arise. It is the substance of memory, understanding and will, and thus, from inception, fully existed, knew, and willed itself, for that is what it is in essence. It is the purest possible grade of Being that we can find inside ourselves, or better put, it is the coming upon ourselves in our depths. Dangers of Higher Learning still remain – the danger of taking for oneself what one should sacrifice to God, as Abraham well knew. Augustine is alive to this stumbling block waiting for those learners who have reached these heights.

This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise. If it does not do it, even though it remembers and understands and loves itself, it is foolish (*De Trin.* XIV, 4. 15).

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<sup>29</sup> Faith is crucial in the Augustinian path, for although it does not provide a full knowing of God, it does provide the learning soul with enough of a beginning, a sense of the right path. How can a learning soul desire God if it does not know him? You cannot love something you are clueless about. Faith provides the glimmer of hope and insight that, if followed and trusted, will finally be transcended in a face to Face relationship that does not need faith anymore. Augustine is practical about how to manifest this Love of God that begins in faith – Love your neighbour. This act presupposes the learning soul experiencing Love, and as God is Love, this act results in an abiding in God (*De Trin.* VIII, 7. 10).

This is the final illumination for the learning soul, what sweeps him up beyond himself into the Light of God.<sup>30</sup> It is here that we have come full circle, back to the phenomenology of eternity, the infinity of its space, the timelessness of its time that Augustine captures in the last four books of *Confessions*, an infinity that we carry an image of inside ourselves. It is in the image of God that we must renew ourselves continuously, attempt to live in the purity of mind, stay open to its presence, remain in the still point, never forgetting its likeness to the Greater Infinity and Eternity on whom it is modelled and was created by.<sup>31</sup> This is the gift that Augustine bequeaths to later generations – a clear description of how we are modelled in the image of Eternity within a Christian perspective of the Triune God. It comes with an immense rider, one that Augustine embraces with a cry of relief after the frustration of attempting such a vast exercise in pedagogy – ‘*Your knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is mighty and I cannot attain it* (Ps. 139: 6). From myself indeed I understand how wonderful and incomprehensible is your knowledge with which you have made me, seeing that I am not

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<sup>30</sup> This leads inevitably to the massive debate over the nature of Divine Illumination, the idea that parts of higher learning only happen through God illuminating us. A student can read and learn as much as he wants, it will only shift from belief and understanding to direct knowledge when it is recognised in an inner light that suddenly gives it truth, an inner light that is experienced as coming from above itself. Only after Augustine saw the Light in his double conversion (Neo-Platonic\Christian) was he able to fully perceive the nature of the non-dual, what it did to our fundamental categories of time, space, cause, effect, memory, will, understanding etc. The truth of this higher learning only becomes apparent when the grace of God opens us up to its Wisdom, giving a luminosity to learnt concepts and dry formulations, suddenly a gateway appears in which non-dual readings of the Bible become possible (as demonstrated by *On the Psalms* and *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*). Only with the continued illumination from God is it possible to work within Wisdom. What He gives He can take away. This makes the learning soul absolutely dependent on God as teacher in the realm of what is infinite, unchanging and true.

<sup>31</sup> A simple way of understanding what is being said is the mantra – *The God within is the God above* (*Homily on Psalms*. 130. 12). The movement inwards reaches its final point in ecstasy – standing outside oneself – where the soul goes beyond itself into what is infinitely greater and brighter. (Thank you to McGinn for pointing me to Augustine’s work *On the Psalms* in his scholarly *The Foundations of Mysticism* Chapt. 7). McGinn’s life-time project of mapping out the history of western mysticism is an astonishing one and he has been one of my most trusted guides throughout this thesis.

even able to comprehend myself whom you have made; and yet a *fire burns up in my meditation* (Ps. 39: 3), causing me to seek your face always' (*De Trin.* XV, 2. 13). *We see now through a mirror in an enigma, but then it will be face to face* (1 Cor. 13: 12). The aim of education is to polish the mirror of ourselves until we can clearly see the image of Divinity imprinted in us. This is a never-ending task, destined to remain under the sign of an enigma, of an obscure likeness difficult to penetrate. It is made even more puzzling by its obviousness – 'who fails to see his own thoughts? And on the other hand who does see his own thoughts?' (*De Trin.* XV, 3. 16).

### Closing

So ends the pedagogical journey that Augustine takes us on through a mirror in an enigma. By discovering in our own pure minds the modes of memory, understanding and will we come to a seeing of the Trinity, through a glass darkly.

Anyone who has a lively intuition of these three (as divinely established in the nature of his mind) and of how great a thing it is that his mind has that by which even the eternal and unchanging nature can be recalled, beheld and desired – it is recalled by memory, beheld by intelligence, embraced by love – has thereby found the image of that supreme trinity, To the memory, sight, and love of this supreme trinity, in order to recollect it, to see it, and enjoy it, he should refer every ounce and particle of his life. But I have sufficiently warned him...that this image, made by the trinity and altered for the worse by its own fault, is not to be compared to that trinity that it is reckoned to be similar to it in every respect. Rather, he should note how great the dissimilarity is in whatever similarity there may be (*De Trin.* XV, 5. 39).

The Ancients mistook the image for the reality, in finding the Divine within they only discovered an Image of a far greater reality that surpassed all their levels of higher learning. We will always exist in the realm of the Imaginary for Augustine, within a holy cavern, our only hope being that we come to perfect our Image to the point where it

mirrors God's face through God's grace. Augustine's life is a pedagogical exemplar of how to perfect an Image, his writing a reorienting of the whole classical tradition, his experience one of The Great Teacher descending downwards in infinite kindness to illuminate a weak willed student stumbling about in the cave of human learning. Yes.

## Chapter Eight: Abelard<sup>1</sup>

### Opening

And Abelard<sup>2</sup> found himself castrated on the Ladder of Beauty, destroyed by thinking too much and not loving enough. He failed in loving one person and failed in loving One

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<sup>1</sup> Why the love story of Abelard and Heloise after Augustine. A time period of over 600 years stands between the two, containing many texts that fit tightly into the set criteria of this thesis. Firstly there is the profound work of Dionysius (around 500 C.E), contained in two short texts of enormous power – *The divine names* and *The mystical theology*. He provided a systematic path for the learning soul to ascend the celestial hierarchy into the cloud of unknowing that transcribed Neo-Platonism directly into Christian terms. Then there is the beautifully told story of how Boethius came to Wisdom while in prison awaiting his death in *Consolations of philosophy*, one of the most influential books to carry ancient wisdom into medieval times. Gregory the Great provides a massively rich guide to the learning soul, not only in his writings but through his life and would have provided a useful contrast to the Augustine chapter. See an excellent modern account in Marcus' *Gregory the Great and his world* (1997). John Scottus Eriugena, probably the most learned man of the 900's (that we know of), produced an astonishing synthesis of Greek, Latin and Christian thought. Utilizing his own translations of Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa he wrote a *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy, The Division of Nature, and Homily on the Prologue of John*, telling a story of incredible proportions of the procession of God outwards and the return of the learning soul into the *No-thing* that is God which fits precisely into the conditions of this thesis. See Carabine (2000) for the only full-scale English introduction to his thought. Yet the tale of Abelard, Heloise and Bernard offered a rich source of continuity and difference with the previous chapters. In Abelard's lustful relationship with his student Heloise we have a direct contrast with the pedagogical maturity shown by Socrates in his relationship with Alcibiades. In Abelard we have the clear beginnings of a new, rational, attitude to Christianity that will come to maturity with Aquinas. In Bernard we have one of the greatest reformers within Christianity as well as a consummate writer on the *Song of Songs*. But most importantly, it is the clashing of individual love, cold reason, and divine love that made me make this choice. After five chapters of successful journeying, I imagined that a more tragic tale of the ladder of beauty disintegrating would provide some release for the reader, providing a kind of counter image that would deepen the previous accounts, bring it down to earth as it were, and provide a foretaste of the master of this art – Shakespeare.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Abelard (1079–1142) stands out as one of the great *individuals* of Medieval times. He strides into the ring, proud and defiant, keen to use his intellect and wit to dazzle and perform, he leaves a broken

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prize-fighter. Born into Breton nobility he gave up his rights as first born to pursue the life of an intellectual. He was not interested in a general education in the seven arts, argument was his passion and so logic and dialectic were his subjects of choice. Able to see clearly into the rationale of words and things, Abelard pursued logical conclusions to their radical end point. He put this skill to great use in showing up logical contradictions in the teachings of his lecturers, often disrupting the lesson and/or destroying their reputations before wandering off to find his next victim. He quickly moved on to setting up his own schools and used them as forums to attack the teachings of various 'masters' in and around Paris, but the strain of continual combat led to a physical collapse and a six year recovery period back in Brittany. He began to develop a taste for theology and used his logical and rhetorical skills to great effect in teaching about God, all of this cumulating in his being appointed head of his own school at the centre of learning in Europe – Paris. His major insight revolved around the realist/nominalist controversy over universals, to which he brought a profound synthesis called Conceptualism. He used this synthesis to effectively critique both realist and nominalist positions. This, combined with his humorous and clear teaching style, led to a formidable reputation and increasing popularity. Seduced by his own power he in turn seduced one of his students – Heloise – setting in motion a catastrophic series of events resulting in his castration and the abandoning of his lover by forcing her to enter a Nunnery at Argenteuil. He entered the Abbey of St Denis in 1119, but this did not mean the beginnings of a contemplative life for Abelard. His use of logic and dialectic on the Mysteries of the Trinity continued to cause controversy, resulting eventually in their condemnation at the Council of Soissons in 1121. Although the judgement was revoked Abelard's unrelenting use of his intellect to reveal contradictions led to his forced retirement and isolation. He was allowed to set up a hermitage in the outskirts of Troyes. Determined students sought him out there, and the isolated spot quickly transformed into a place of learning. The idyllic location was not without its difficulties. A student rebellion and ambitions within the church pushed Abelard into accepting the post of Abbot at the St Gildas de Rhuys – an isolated, ill disciplined monastery on the coast of Brittany – in 1126. The monks resisted reform and were antagonistic towards Abelard to the point of attempting his poisoning. In 1128 he heard that Heloise and her nuns had been expelled from Argenteuil, and so, after nine years of no contact, he offered her his abandoned Hermitage – the Paraclete. This was formalized in 1129. Abelard found no respite in the renewed contact. The Paraclete was approximately 360 miles from St Gildas. When he spent time at the Paraclete he was accused of lustful intentions, when he did not he was accused of not caring enough for the nuns. Finally Abelard secured the right to retain his position as Abbot but leave St Gildas and pursue a teaching career around and in Paris. This he did until 1140, when he was again accused of heresy at Sens by Bernard of Clairvaux. Abelard, rather than defend himself, appealed to the Pope. As he journeyed towards Rome to make his case, letters from Bernard reached Rome first, convincing the Pope to condemn Abelard without a hearing. The news reached Abelard while he was resting from his journey at Cluny under the hospitality of Peter the Venerable. Peter secured the lifting of the heretical sentence after

God because he loved his own intellect. The heights of earthly and godly love were not his to experience although he was deeply loved by one woman and knew that God loved him. He reasoned his way through both, and for his troubles was made a eunuch and a heretic. Abelard knew a woman who adored him and encountered a man who had experienced the Kiss of the Word, yet he never fully tasted the different fruits they offered, rather experienced the calamities both could bring. The Ladder of Beauty splinters into different rungs with this chronicle, becoming a tower of Babel<sup>3</sup> – Heloise cries out from the depths of loving one unique individual, Bernard of Clairvaux descends in wrath from the heights of tasting the Kiss of the Bridegroom, while Abelard proudly stamps around in-between, using the weapons of dialectic and reason to prod both. We do not have a simple journey of the learning soul in the tale of Abelard, Heloise and Bernard. Heloise refuses to acknowledge the love of Christ for she loves Abelard too

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reconciling Abelard with Bernard, allowing Abelard to die in peace in 1142. Much of this chapter is taken from *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* translated and introduced by B. Radice (1974), containing the *Historia Calamitatum*, the four personal letters, three letters of direction, Abelard's Confession of Faith, letters of Peter the Venerable and Heloise to each other as well as two of Abelard's Hymns. Abelard's own work consists mainly of a continual revision of his *Theologia*, which came out in three versions – *Theologia 'summi boni'* (*Theology of the highest good*) 1120?; *Theologia christiana* (*Christian theology*) 1125?; and *Theologia scolarium* (*Theology for students*) 1135? Other works consist of his early commentaries on logic *Logica ingredientibus* (*Logic for beginners*) 1120?, his work on *Dialectica* (*Dialectics*) 1120?, a summary of the seven books needed to be armed for combat in thought (works of Aristotle, Porphyry and Boethius), *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum* (*Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian*) 1125?, and *Ethica* (*Ethics*) 1138. Abelard's logical and theological work failed to influence future generations as it was mostly based on using fragments of ancient texts. With the rediscovery of Aristotle's works a more complete picture emerged, calling for a new synthesis that went beyond what Abelard had written. For resources on Abelard I have relied on his *Historia Calamitatum* (HC.), *the Letters*, the *Ethics* as well as the superbly researched and detailed *Abelard: a medieval life* by Clanchy (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye points out that the ladder of Jacob descending from heaven has its negative equivalent in the Tower of Babel. Jacob changed the name of the place he had the dream at from Luz to *Bethel*, meaning place of God. This is the meaning of Babel (gate of God), thus producing a destructive counterpart to Jacob's ladder. See his brilliant *Words with power* (1990) 152–155.

much, Bernard refuses to accept the role of reasoned argument in understanding the transcendent nature of Divine Love,<sup>4</sup> and Abelard in attempting to understand both, experiences neither. Unlike the success stories of Socrates and Alcibiades, Abraham and Sarah, the bride and Bridegroom, the alone to the Alone, and the confessions of a Saint, we have a cautionary tale over here, a tale of a great teacher, proud of his physical beauty and intellectual prowess, dying castrated and silenced, stretched out on the rack of Love.

### **The Calamities of Abelard**

Abelard tells his own story in *Historia Calamitatum* (Story of His Misfortunes) in a manner very different to Augustine's *Confessions* – it is a tale of enemies attacking, not love found, of escalating calamity not rising transcendence.<sup>5</sup> He is continually condemnatory or defensive, berating his adversaries, defending his position, arguing his case. There is no enlightenment here, only a litany of increasing woe that came with his proud attempt to bring reason to a fallacious world and his desire to defeat anyone claiming the ability to do it better than he. Abelard experienced the enlightenment of reason as a young man through his study of Dialectic and Logic. By the time of his last confession he recognised that it had made him hated by the world, yet he never gave up the light it awarded him. He was enchanted by the power of logic from a young age. As first-born he gave up both his inheritance and a soldierly way of life in order to pursue its pleasures. He withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva –

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<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that Bernard rejected the use of dialectic altogether. As John Sommerfeldt points out in 'Epistemology, education and social' (Pennington [1977] 169–179), it depended on what it was used for. As a means towards understanding Divine Love it was positively dangerous, for the secular clergy engaged in the tasks of this world it was vital. Abelard's mistake for Bernard was his use a secular tool on a Divine Subject.

<sup>5</sup> This use of personal confession/testimony by Augustine and Abelard opened out the languages of the self that eventually led to increasing experimentation within, and secularisation of, the genre. See Jerry Root's *Space to speke* (1997) for an account of Augustine and Abelard's influence on the more secular languages of the self of Chaucer, Machaut and Ruiz.

dialectic replaced the sword as his weapon of choice, disputation in the fields of language replaced land and country as his battleground (*HC*. 58). Armed with logic he travelled through France seeking teachers he could learn from and challenge in mental combat. Abelard had felt the force of Dialectic as a youngster and it consumed him.<sup>6</sup> He practiced it on whoever he encountered, quickly becoming able enough to challenge the Masters of the day. Dialectic, for Abelard, was not a tool to be used in the search for Enlightenment or a final seeing of The Good. It was a weapon of advantage used by the already enlightened in pursuit of the riches of fame, the glorification of self, the mastery of defeat. He desired to become the most celebrated master of Dialectic in France, for this would mean influence, reputation and bulging classrooms full of paying students. Being adept in Dialectic was as far as learning needed to go, in its armoury education had all it needed to slice challengers apart.<sup>7</sup> What precisely was it that made Dialectic so powerful, desirable, and dangerous at the turn of the twelfth century?

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<sup>6</sup> As a youth Abelard was initially taught by Roscelin, a nominalist dialectician who was declared a heretic in 1093 for denying the unity of the Trinity. The careers of Abelard and Roscelin are eerily similar, as pointed out by Clanchy – both were declared Heretics over using secular logic on the Trinity; both were teachers of Logic who continually attracted pupils to their sides even though (or because) they were controversial; both were attacked by the most powerful religious thinkers of the day. For more similarities see Clanchy (1997) 294. Although Abelard does not mention his first teacher in *HC*., Roscelin clearly had a major impact on Abelard's views, as we will see later when we discuss the Nominalism of Abelard.

<sup>7</sup> As Bernard caustically noted, there are four reasons to pursue knowledge, three of which are dodgy. Gilson provides the summary:

Some of them learn in order to know; others in order that it may be known that they know; and others again in order to sell their knowledge. To learn in order to know is scandalous curiosity...mere self-indulgence of a mind that makes the play of its own activity its end. To learn for the sake of a reputation for learning is vanity. To learn in order to traffic in learning is cupidity, and, what is worse, simony, since it is to traffic in spiritual things... The only proper thing to do is to make our choice between the sciences with a view to salvation, that is to say so that we may acquire charity, just as one chooses one's food with an eye to health (Gilson [1940] 64).

Augustine had characterized Dialectic as reason showing herself. In Dialectic she opened up what she was and what she desired to the probing mind. It was the discipline of all disciplines, teaching how to teach and how to learn. It opposed murkiness and obfuscation with intelligibility and directness – Dialectic was knowing what knowing is (Clanchy [1997] 95). Abelard loved to quote the Saint in support of his passion, but he took Dialectic out of its allocated place in the journey of the learning soul and used it as his vehicle of choice to travel through the heights and depths. Abelard used reason to explore both the nature of the world and God, convinced that both were open to its logic. More precisely, he used logic to explore the formulations made of God and world. God might be unfathomable in his Greatness, but the statements made about him by humans were definitely open to examination, comparison and resolution. Dialectic was the great opener of secrets, nothing said and experienced by Humanity was closed to its scrutiny. Anything formulated in language was thus the domain of Dialectic, its brief being to scrutinize language for its illogicality and authenticity. This great project – hinted at in Socrates' inquiries into the uses of ordinary language and Plato's later analytical texts – received its first full articulation in the work of Aristotle. Abelard was deeply versed in the fragments of Aristotle's work surviving Antiquity.<sup>8</sup> He was the new Aristotle, wandering around France in the same way that Aristotle's students had supposedly travelled around the Ancient world, providing the light of reason to a world filled with error.

This light was based on a battery of techniques to analyse the meanings of language, isolate the different ways in which words mean, and use the analysis to point to inadequacies of argument based on specific rules. Although there was much agreement on the techniques there was serious divergence over what status to give the analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> Abelard used the commentaries of the Neo-Platonist Porphyry and Boethius on Aristotle as well as his *Categories* and *De Interpretatione* as the basic texts to teach Logic. The major impact of Aristotle on the Latin west through the rediscovery of his work in Arab and Jewish commentators was still to happen, although Abelard was able to reconstruct some of Aristotle's system. It makes him a forerunner of the Scholastics and a good symbol for the manner in which Dialectic\Logic impacted on Medieval thought.

Given that language could be analysed by concepts, what was the ontological status of the abstractions? They could not be seen or touched, so were they real or not?<sup>9</sup> Plato had given the first great answer in his Formal World, a *real* world of abstract forms that generated this world of becoming we exist in. Aristotle had argued that this was one world too many, that forms did not have a separate existence in a world beyond us but existed only *conceptually* in this world as the forming principles of matter. Aristotle

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<sup>9</sup> This was the great philosophical question of the twelfth century. If all the roses of the world disappeared, what would the name 'rose' refer to? Does this general abstract term (or universal) exist in some kind of its own reality or only in our thoughts? If it existed in reality, *what* was the nature of its existence – tangible or intangible and *where* did it exist – outside of or inside of material things. All of these questions hung over the name of a rose. Abelard took what was then a radically simple line through the morass of debate. Universals are some-what of the same that can be said about many different things – many different roses in the world, one term 'rose'. Each rose as a *thing* is unique, it exists as itself not as something else. Hence universals cannot be things, because they exist in the same way for many things. It must be something else apart from a unique thing, as it exists for several things. Abelard turned to the nature of language for an answer. Certain terms refer to individual things e.g. Socrates, other terms refer to a number of individuals e.g. man. The question that then arose was how can one term refer to several individual things. Abelard answered that it was in the nature of things, that although individually existing things were unique, they contained similarities to other things. When these were picked out by language and correctly applied to numerous individuals, a universal occurred. The similarities arise in the ability of the mind to remember various individual things, to hold images of it in its mind's eye. When similar things are categorized together in the mind, a necessary haziness occurs. Uniqueness and particularity are obliterated so that a general likeness can arise. This cloudy image is what a universal is in the mind and the names it gives to these hazy similarities are universal terms. Thus universals, for Abelard, exist in the understanding as a generalization from various actually existing particulars. There is no actually existing essence that universals refer to, all that really exists are the terms themselves as terms and the hazy images these name. Hence it is probably best to call Abelard a conceptualist interested in the logic of how meaning works. This was how *man* worked with universals. With God it was a different story – he 'saw' the Ideas pristinely, working in ways more similar to how Plato viewed the existence of Ideas as the super-Real. Man worked according to the logic of Aristotle, wrapped up in sensibles with vague universals. God worked more in ways described by Plato, with pure Ideas. The two great Ancients together captured the ways of God and man and Abelard felt (in his humility) that he had synthesized their works into one whole. See Spade's *5 texts on the Medieval problem of universals* (1994) for an excellent source book on this issue.

brought Forms back to earth. This was a vexed area of dispute as the Platonic Forms and The Good had transmuted into thinking about the Mind of God and the Trinity for the Medievals. By taking a conceptualist stance on universals one was seriously shaking the Augustinian synthesis that had built itself on a Platonic backbone. It distressed the basis for believing in a separately existing, divine world by stamping, and then leaving Forms, in earthly products. The journey of the learning soul did not have to travel upwards and inwards into real worlds of increasing abstraction. The forms existed in the concrete, everyday world as its forming principles. These principles were discoverable through a simple set of categories and operating procedures that could be taught to anyone, thus opening out the mysteries of the earthly and divine worlds to all comers. This is what Dialectic offered: it is why students sought out teachers who could disclose its inner workings; why Orthodoxy branded those who practiced it on sacred fields as heretics; and why Abelard – the great teacher of Dialectic – was so popular.

Abelard's conviction that Dialectic could be used to understand scripture was confirmed while he was studying under Anselm of Laon.<sup>10</sup> He arrogantly criticized this great teacher for kindling a fire in the house of learning that resulted only in smoke, and when the other students challenged him to better, he offered to demonstrate that he could (*HC*. 62). An exceptionally difficult and obscure prophecy of Ezekiel was agreed on and Abelard offered to do the interpretation the very next day. The students advised him to take longer in preparing, given that the text was difficult and Abelard was inexperienced. He indignantly refused, insisting that his intelligence and reason alone would suffice to perform the analysis. His lecture the next day was brilliantly successful. Students began

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<sup>10</sup> Abelard tells the story in *HC*. 62–64. There is speculation that he went to Laon with the express purpose of undermining Anselm for an influential political friend, Stephan de Garlande, in return for which he was awarded the position of master of the Cathedral school of Notre-Dame in 1114. It gives an ugly undercurrent to Abelard's already chequered history. Certainly, the fortunes of Stephan and Abelard correspond, with Stephan acting as protector and mediator in the St Denis incident, and it is only with Stephan's fall from royal favour in 1137 that Abelard was open to the attacks that led to Sens. For more speculation on their relationship see Clanchy (1997) 73–4 and 142–4.

to flock to Abelard's lessons to the point where Anselm and his two best students (Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy) banned Abelard from teaching in Laon. At around the same time Abelard was offered the post of *magister scholarum* at the school of Notre Dame at the centre of new learning – Paris. Here he continued in the same successful vein, using Dialectic to illuminate language and scripture, to the point where his renown as a teacher began to spread throughout France and the Latin west. The fame went straight to Abelard's head. As he puts it:

But success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think of myself as the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh (*HC*. 65).<sup>11</sup>

Abelard had been untainted up to this point, refraining from the temptations of prostitutes and gentlewomen alike because of the expectations of his position for chastity and his removal from secular life due to his studies. All this was to change, as in Paris lived a young girl named Heloise.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The passage continues with a summary of what then happened which anticipates the rest of the tale, so I leave it in a footnote for those who like previews.

Hitherto I had been entirely continent, but now the further I advanced in philosophy and theology, the further I fell behind the philosophers and holy Fathers in the impurity of my life.... Since...I was wholly enslaved to pride and lechery, God's grace provided a remedy for both these evils, though not one of my choosing: first for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practiced it, and then for the pride which had grown in me through my learning...when I was humiliated by the burning of the book of which I was so proud (*HC* 65).

<sup>12</sup> There is speculation about the age of Heloise. Either she was around 17, given the term *adolescentula* Abelard used to describe her, or around 26, given her astounding knowledge of the classics. I go with Clanchy (1997) 173–4 that the second seems more probable. She suffered two deaths, one at the hands of Abelard in 1118 when he forced her to take the veil, another in 1164 when she was finally laid to rest next

Abelard may have climbed to the heights of Dialectic, but he had not yet tasted the pleasures of the body. Although the beauty of logic had entranced him with its austere simplicity and power, the beauties of the body had not yet been touched. This was not all the young Heloise offered him. She was fiercely intelligent and well educated for a young woman of the times, standing supreme among her sex in the depth and breadth of her knowledge (*HC*. 66). As the greatest philosopher and teacher of his time, Abelard considered her conquest a simple affair. He arranged to become her tutor as part payment for lodging in her uncle's house. Fulbert was pleased, not only was his niece furthering her already impressive education with an exceptional teacher, but he was getting rent money as well. He gave Abelard full charge over Heloise, allowing Abelard to visit her day and night, whenever his leisure time allowed, even encouraging Abelard to discipline her severely if she was found to be idle. Abelard was astounded by the naivety of Fulbert – 'if he had entrusted a tender lamb to a ravening wolf it would not have surprised me more. In handing her over to me to punish as well as to teach, what else was he doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires?' (*HC*. 67). Unlike Socrates who had travelled beyond Dialectic into a direct seeing of Beauty and The Good, Abelard had no such experience, he plunged gleefully down into the innocent arms of his student. 'Need I say more?' Education and Lust mingled freely:

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to his body. We will meet with her interior torment in the main body of the text, the outside facts are as follows. Born either around 1090 or 1099, father unknown, looked after by her uncle Fulbert and educated at Argenteuil and Notre-Dame. Exceptionally well read in the classics, her secular education was cut off when Abelard insisted she become a nun after his castration. She quickly moved up the ranks of the Convent at Argenteuil, becoming prioress in 1123. A dispute over the ownership of the convent led to her expulsion from Argenteuil in 1129, but she and her nuns found refuge at the Paraclete, given to her by Abelard. After initial difficulties she transformed the Paraclete into a thriving concern, was made Abbess and protected by Pope Innocent II in 1131. She received a massive amount of material from Abelard on the spiritual running of the Paraclete, but we have no record of her using the information or thanking him. She received the body of Abelard in 1144 and died twenty years later, a highly respected and successful Abbess.

[W]ith our lessons as a pretext we abandoned ourselves entirely to love. Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as love desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts. To avert suspicion I sometimes struck her, but these blows were prompted by love and tender feeling rather than anger and irritation, and were sweeter than any balm could be. In short, our desires left no stage of love-making untried, and if love could devise something new, we welcomed it. We entered on each joy the more eagerly for our previous inexperience, and were less easily sated (*HC*. 67–68).

Abelard and Heloise had satisfied the yearnings of their minds without giving their physical desires any expression. Union of intellect had occurred before union of body and the dark cave of physicality called for pleasuring. Abelard lost all interest in his teaching, logic was wearisome and boring, studying difficult because of the sleepless nights spent in the arms of Heloise. He did no preparation and relied on his old lessons to get through the day. Minerva paled when compared to a real, live, intelligent, beautiful Heloise. His ardour spilled over into love songs, poetic declarations of love replacing the arcane formulations of Philosophy. Abelard and Heloise experienced the singular joy of descending into pleasures supposedly transcended.

Such a heedless tumbling into the dusky world of fornication was bound to be discovered. The whole of France was singing the love songs of Abelard to Heloise and eventually Fulbert heard of their antics and separated them. It only spurred them on. ‘We became more abandoned as we lost all sense of shame and, indeed, shame diminished as we found more opportunities for love-making. And so we were caught in the act as the poet says happened to Mars and Venus’ (*HC*. 69). Banned from seeing each other, Heloise discovered that she was pregnant, wrote to Abelard in joy, asking him what to do. They decided to steal away from Fulbert whilst he was travelling and flee to Abelard’s

family in Brittany where Heloise gave birth to a baby boy called Astrolabe.<sup>13</sup> Removing Heloise from the clutches of her uncle served a number of purposes. She may have been mistreated by Fulbert for her mischief – obviously dangerous for a woman in her condition. More likely is that Abelard was in desperate trouble for his antics and was threatened by Fulbert seeking revenge. By removing Heloise to his family's safekeeping he was ensuring his own safety – anything inflicted on him would be exacted on Heloise in return. Abelard and Fulbert then entered into negotiations, with Abelard offering the compromise of marrying Heloise so long as it was kept secret. His ambitions in the church would not allow for a public joining of the flesh. Fulbert agreed to the compromise, although it did nothing to assuage his desire for public retribution, for he needed to secure Heloise's safety before pursuing revenge. So it was that Heloise and Abelard secretly married and the rest of the tale plays out its tragic sequence.

Heloise understood the practical logic of the situation better than Abelard. She realized that her uncle would never be satisfied with a secret marriage – either he would let the secret out, or secure Heloise and then pursue a vendetta against Abelard. Marriage solved nothing, besides which, she did not want to marry Abelard anyway. Here we begin to hear the capability and uniqueness of Heloise's voice – a voice we will allow full expression later on. Heloise loved Abelard, but did so within a vision that saw his importance to the rest of the world. Abelard describes her argument.

The world would justly exact punishment from her if she removed such a light from its midst. Think of the curses, the loss to the Church and grief of philosophers which would greet such a marriage! Nature had created me for all mankind – it would be a sorry scandal if I should bind myself to a single woman

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<sup>13</sup> A dark fictional version of the story of Abelard and Heloise has been told from the viewpoint of Astrolabe by Luise Rinser called *Abelard's Love* (1998). It is in the form of a letter from Astrolabe to his mother set just after Abelard's death.

and submit to such base servitude. She absolutely rejected this marriage; it would be nothing but a disgrace and a burden to me (*HC*. 70).

She loved Abelard absolutely, wanted entirely what he wanted, desired his success above all, wished him to be completely free from anxious care and able to single-mindedly pursue greatness and destiny. Desks and cradles did not mix well (*HC*. 71). She wished the whole world to see the greatness of her loved one rather than keep him for herself. Hers was a love that demanded nothing in return. She understood the ladder of Beauty and wanted to watch Abelard ascend it from her encouraging bed below. Abelard refused to listen to her passionate arguments and insisted that they get married. Heloise acquiesced with the words: 'We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been' (*HC*. 74).

After Abelard and Heloise got secretly married with her uncle present, Fulbert began to proclaim the union to restore previous dishonour. When Heloise was confronted with the claim she denied marriage outright, causing much abusive anger against her in the Fulbert household. Abelard was concerned for the safety of Heloise so he abducted her again, this time removing her to a nunnery in Argenteuil, near Paris, making her take on the religious habit of a novice nun (without the veil). Fulbert was incensed and imagined that Abelard had conveniently got rid of Heloise by forcing her into a nunnery – thus proving that no marriage had occurred, or that any bond was now broken, and protecting Abelard's ambition for advancement. A plot was hatched to revenge Fulbert's dishonoured household. Abelard's servant was bribed to let the vengeance seekers into his sleeping chamber. Unlike Origen, who had laid violent hands on his own to cure himself of carnal desires, Abelard suffered the same fate for enjoying them too much. He was castrated as he lay in drugged sleep.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In all probability Abelard was drugged when the castration occurred, and it was done by someone with the requisite skill. He describes it as short and almost painless (*HC*. 99). Add to this that he did not get any infections and we have clear evidence of a procedure carried out with surgical skill.

The next morning Abelard had to face a crowd of interested onlookers as well as his distraught students bewailing his fate. In desperate, anguished humiliation he took the easy way out. He insisted that Heloise officially take the veil and enter a convent and then entered monastic service himself. He made no attempt to build up a relationship with Heloise based on Love. With his offending member removed, he distanced himself completely from her. There was no genuine conversion for either of the ill-fated lovers. Abelard was driven by shame and remorse to seek sanctuary...and Heloise – Heloise had no desire to marry Christ, she loved only one man. She consented to Christ only because the man she loved demanded it from her. As she went to the altar she tearfully burst out into a pagan lament<sup>15</sup> before falsely committing herself to loving Christ for the rest of her earthly life.

Abelard was quick to recover, his intellect had not been damaged by the severe-ment, indeed, he was now free to pursue its enchantments single-mindedly. Heloise was forgotten and Abelard began to chase a career in Divinity with as much bravado and confidence as he had done in Philosophy. His aim was now to become the true philosopher of God rather than of the World. He undertook the task of applying Dialectic to the collected mass of Christian Scripture and Commentary of the Fathers as well as to the great conundrum of Christianity – the Trinity. How God could be both One and Three had caused much controversy and debate since the inception of Christianity. Abelard undertook to make this most sacred of mysteries clear and accessible to all through the use of logical analysis. His students were asking for something fair and reasonable. They

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<sup>15</sup> She quoted Cornelia's lament in Lucan's *Pharsalia*:

O noble husband,  
 Too great for me to wed, was it my fate  
 To bend that lofty head? What prompted me  
 To marry you and bring about your fall?  
 Now claim your due, and see me gladly pay...

(*HC*. 76)

needed more than mere words and formulae in order to believe – the words had to have some ground in intelligibility before faith could take over (*HC*. 78). A glimmer of understanding was necessary to know what it was one was believing in.<sup>16</sup> Dialectic specialized in analysing how naming worked in relation to reality, so it was an ideal tool to use in working through the difficulties of naming God. We give different names to one substance. Tullius, Cicero, and Marcus are all different names for the same substance we call Man. Tullius is a man, Cicero is a man, and Marcus is a man – three names, one substance – problem solved.<sup>17</sup> Abelard wrote down the results of applying Dialectic to God in a theological treatise *On the Unity and Trinity of God*. His students found his constructivist<sup>18</sup> teaching useful for the logical analysis and scaffolding it provided, but

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<sup>16</sup> The position of Abelard on faith and understanding is reasonable, especially as a teacher keen to explain the concept of God to confused students. Before a three-in-one God can be believed in, there must be some purchase on what this highly confusing Being is. By providing specific, concrete examples of what the Trinity resembled, Abelard was enabling faith to grasp onto what it was believing in, rather than leaving it in a void. Yet for Bernard faith was of first priority, as it provided the basic principles accepted without reason as revelation. Only after faith was established could one begin to reason about what faith had revealed. Reason could then achieve much in understanding God, although God was always more than reason could comprehend. The danger of using reason to *understand* God is that it stood in the way of *experiencing* God. It is a small difference of emphasis, but the consequences of each position are profound. As a teacher Abelard was concerned with explaining God to his students, Bernard was involved in showing his students how to encounter God. This involved processes beyond reason, reason even proved damaging to the attempt as God was beyond Reason, and an encounter with him was blocked by conceptions of what He was like.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Very rightly the Father is believed to be God and the Son and the Holy Spirit, but they are not considered as several gods, since these are three names designating the divine substance. So likewise Tullius is truly said to be a man and so is Cicero and Marcus also is called a man. Yet in no way are Marcus and Tullius and Cicero [different] men, since these are words designating the same substance.’ Quoted by Clanchy (1997) 109.

<sup>18</sup> Abelard was clearly a gifted and charismatic teacher and his highly critical personality tends to hide the constructivist nature of his academic writing that was concerned to build up a new and workable system

many of Abelard's old enemies – notched up through years of dialectical combat – felt that he had overstepped the line dividing man's reason from God's unfathomability. A Council was convened against Abelard in Soissons at the instigation of Alberic and Lotulf. Abelard arrived, keen to defend himself in dialectical combat, only to find his work condemned as heretical without debate or defence, indeed without being read. How could his attackers allow Abelard a word in when he was more skilled than them in the arts of Dialectic, and would triumph over them with sophistries? (*HC*. 82). He was forced to throw his logical reasoning on God to the flames with his own hands. He was not even allowed to make his own profession of faith in front of the Council but was forced to read, parrot fashion, from the Athanasian Creed, which he did in tears. Then he was handed over to the abbot of St Mendard, who as a prison warder, took him to his cloister.

Abelard descended into the 'agony of despair' (*HC*. 84). The betrayal and humiliation of Soissons was more painful to him than his castration. Abelard had his first taste of the antipathy that was aroused by applying logic to divinity. Unlike Augustine who used his reasoning on the Trinity to point out a journey of the learning soul towards God, Abelard was set on explaining God in the interest of clarity and logic. Augustine had experienced the image of God inside of him and wrote from this deep familiarity. Abelard had run from carnality into divinity because of castration and was writing from what the rules of Dialectic and Logic showed him. Their experiences of God were of a different order. Yet the calling of Abelard was a necessary one. Christianity had collected within its Patristic heritage a complex and contradictory set of doctrines. It was time for a house cleaning and the use of dialectic and logic on its Canon was overdue. The scholastic drive to make Christianity logical, epitomized by Aquinas, had its forerunner in the previous century – Abelard – and it is he who had to bear the brunt of fury that comes with first attempts.

The deep humiliation Abelard suffered was partly assuaged by the recognition that the Council had acted unfairly in not allowing Abelard to defend his writings. He was

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rather than merely tear down all opposition. John Marenbon's *The philosophy of Peter Abelard* (1997) provides a useful reminder of the constructivist dimensions of Abelard's work.

allowed to return to his monastery at St Denis where he quickly recovered his humour and delight in debate. In his researches at the library of St Denis he came across a statement of Bede that placed a question mark on the genuineness of the Monastery's claim to the Saints patronage. In teasing the monks about the dubiousness of their founder, Abelard antagonized the Monks to the point where they convened a meeting and decided to send Abelard to the King of France on the charge of treason. St Denis stood as a symbol of heroic martyrdom for king and country, an icon of all that was good and brave in France, and here was Abelard making a joke that questioned its ancestry. First he had used reason on God, now he was turning its critical thrust onto the heritage of France. The charge of treason would lead to consequences even more severe than castration or heresy. Abelard had again managed to use his acute mind to boil the waters surrounding him. He fled secretly to the safe haven of an ally, and finally after much negotiation was allowed to set up a retreat where he would cause less trouble with his overly active and critical mind.

The journey into the wilderness on the road to Enlightenment is a familiar theme for the learning soul. Abelard took himself off to a 'lonely spot' (*HC*. 88) and built a small oratory of reeds and thatch. Unlike Abraham who was visited by God in the desert, Abelard found himself quickly inundated by students seeking to be taught. They abandoned the rich luxuries of city life to learn at the feet of a master in ascetic conditions. It removed the windows of their souls (the senses) from the vices of decadent images that could invade their souls and bring disharmony and corruption (*HC*. 89). In the quiet setting of country life they could take up the philosophic quest. Abelard did not discourage them. He hated physical labour and so exchanged his teaching for their looking after his physical needs and building up the oratory into a proper teaching establishment. Abelard called this place that sprung from nothing the Paraclete (the Comforter) for the manner in which it had succoured him in the depths of his anguish. For Abelard the Wilderness did not represent a further level of development, it was a place of recovery until he could again chase the ambition of making Christianity logical. Teaching at the Paraclete was not easy, and there seems to have been serious conflicts

between Abelard and his students (Clanchy [1997] 241). When offered the prestigious post of Abbot at the Abbey of St Gildas de Rhuys he left his students and took himself off to the western edge of Brittany. 'I wilfully took myself from one danger to another, and there by the fearful roar of the waves of the Ocean, at the far ends of the earth where I could flee no further, I used to repeat in my prayers the words of the Psalmist: "From the end of the earth I have been called to thee when my heart was in anguish" '(HC. 95). Abelard found himself confronted with a monastery and community that did not want any reforming. It seemed to him that everything he had attempted had failed, projects he had begun were abandoned half complete. The pointlessness of his life became his only companion.

At this dark point in the being of Abelard, Heloise stepped into his life again. She had risen to the position of Prioress at the Abbey of Argenteuil before being forcibly expelled with her nuns due to the charge of immorality.<sup>19</sup> Abelard offered Heloise and her faithful nuns his abandoned Paraclete, handing it over to her as a gift in the first meeting with her after ten years of no contact. She quickly transformed the place into a vigorous community, more adept than Abelard at the specifics of managing the details of everyday life. It gave Abelard a haven of peace and tranquillity away from the increasingly murderous monks waiting for him at St Gildas. Even though accused of still physically desiring the company of Heloise, Abelard began to assist her in the managing of the Paraclete. Yet the sanctuary of women committed to God was not enough to protect Abelard from the afflictions that had chased him down since he was a young man.

Satan has put so many obstacles in my path that I can find nowhere to rest or even to live; a fugitive and wanderer I carry everywhere the curse of Cain, forever

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<sup>19</sup> Abelard states that Abbot Sugar of Saint Denis acquired the convent of Argenteuil through an ancient connection of the two institutions. To what extent there was immorality or incompetence is hard to ascertain. See Enid McCleod's *Heloise* (1971) for a full account.

tormented...by 'quarrels all round us, forebodings in our heart', or rather, quarrels and forebodings without and within (*HC*. 102).

Abelard had lived the life of dialectic and argument and all it had brought him was anguish and pain along with fame. The monks at St Gildas had reached the point of poisoning Abelard's food and drink as well as hiring robbers to murder him as he went on his travels. Castrated and accused of Heresy, imprisoned by fear in his own monastery, accused of impropriety when visiting his only retreat even though unable, Abelard ends the story of his misfortunes caught at the ends of the earth at the age of fifty. Yet it was not the end but the beginning of a correspondence that was to enthral the world and a tragedy that made his previous calamities pale.

### **The tragic love of Heloise**

If Abelard suffered the misfortune of relying on his reason too much, Heloise suffered from loving one man. Abelard was unique, no one could replace him for her. Losing him meant an emptiness that could never be filled. Heloise speaks from the position of loving one person to the core. In her letters we hear a voice sounding from the lower rungs of the ladder of beauty, refusing to ascend to the heights, for in the depths of loving one man a climax had been reached that obliterated the need to move ever upwards. His singular beauty was a sea of beauty for Heloise. She refused to shift from the love of one to the love of many; to the love of institutions and ideals; to the love of the Divine; for in her first love she had already experienced the depth of infinity. Her critique sounds for all those left behind loving too much as others rise to transcendent heights, sounds for all those oppressed by the ladder of beauty. In the first extant lines we have written by her, she breaks through all the pretence and formality of traditional positions, roles, and expectations of wife and nun. She directly addresses her only loved one after years of silence, the hell of formal contact and the hypocrisy of pretended religiosity.

*To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, Heloise.*<sup>20</sup>

She had received a copy of *Historia Calamitatum* second hand and read it eagerly with a lover's eye, hoping for some comfort in the words of the life of the man she had lost. Instead she found 'nearly every line of the letter...filled with gall and wormwood' (*Letter I*). Hurt by his description of their affair, fearful for his life and upset about his wasted genius and lack of personal contact with her, she writes a letter to Abelard breaking the silence, pleading for his personal support in helping her and the community of the Paraclete he had helped found. She had given Abelard everything – even married Another at his wish – and now felt that this infinite love deserved something in return. He had not even bothered to write to her, choosing some arbitrary friend in her stead, surely infinite love given freely incurred some form of debt?

[Y]ou are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of marriage sacrament uniting us, and are the deeper in my debt because of the love I have always borne you, as everyone knows, a love which is beyond all bounds (*Letter I*).

Diotima had warned against the capricious dangers of loving a mortal human being in a world of becoming, Augustine had cautioned against the tendency to love a man as if he were immortal, Heloise threw caution to the wind and loved one human being absolutely. It resulted in loss – loss of her own self in the loss of Abelard and loss in the manner of the losing. It was a loving so great and a hurt so massive that Heloise felt something was owed her in return. Abelard was the sole cause of her sorrow and the only one who could bring her relief. Her anguish is so palpable that I will hand over to her own voice.

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<sup>20</sup> Letter 1. Heloise to Abelard:109. She plays on the contradictory *roles* of spiritual Father and earthly Husband and the confused richness and hypocrisy it brings to their relationship. All of it is posturing – what counts is the Unique Individual she loves – Abelard, and her own self hurt in the loving – Heloise.

You alone have the power to make me sad, to bring me happiness or comfort; you alone have so great a debt to repay me, particularly now when I have carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself. ...God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours. I looked for no marriage-bond... and it was not my own pleasures and wishes I sought to gratify as you well know, but yours. The name of wife may have seemed more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always the word mistress, or...concubine or whore. ...God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore (*Letter I*).

Unlike Alcibiades who sought wisdom in exchange for his physical beauty, Heloise offered herself up utterly, disappearing from herself to be present for Abelard. She did not give birth to wisdom like Sarah, only an abandoned child and anguish combined with perpetual regret. When Christ turned down ownership of the world during the Temptation in the wilderness He gave up no more than Heloise was prepared to, except He did it for Humanity, Heloise did it for one man. In the existence of their love she became non-existent. All her actions had only one intention behind them, to love and serve Abelard. If the consequences of their love had led to tragedy, their actions were washed clean by the purity of their intentions. Heloise's intentions had been pure from the beginning, based only on love. She had loved Abelard without any expectation of recompense, loved him purely for who he was. Abelard, on the other hand, did not seem so blameless, his actions spoke of intentions other than love. They spoke of lust. Why had he not written to her after the tragedy, why had he neglected and abandoned her?

Tell me, I say, if you can – or I will tell you what I think and indeed the world suspects. It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust

rather than love. So when the end came to what you desired, any show of feeling you used to make went with it (*Letter I*).

Abelard had used Heloise for his own desires, mouthing words of love to facilitate seduction and compliance with his cravings. Yet she still loved him completely, was unable to help herself, fell under him in loving helplessness. Even when Abelard mistrustfully insisted that she take her vows first, in case she balked at the altar, Heloise had taken on the austerities of the cloister because of her commitment to him. It was not for love of God that she became a nun, only love of Abelard. No *Song of Songs* between bride and Bridegroom would happen for Heloise, she had done nothing for love of God, everything for love of Abelard – her song of songs was to one man and it is more of a lament. In loving Abelard she wished to disappear in his power, instead he had disappeared. If Abelard did not desire her in flesh anymore, the least he could do was send her some words of comfort to help her soul...any contact was better than silence.

When in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures your letters came to me thick and fast, and your many songs put your Heloise on everyone's lips, so that every street and house echoed with my name. Is it not far better now to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust? I beg you, think what you owe me, give ear to my pleas, and I will finish a long letter with a brief ending: farewell, my only love (*Letter I*).

Abelard had seduced his student, taught her how to descend into the pleasures of the flesh, would he now be able to teach her how to ascend towards God? The great teacher of logic and dialectic, philosopher of the world and then of God, was given one more task, to lift his ex student and lover towards God.

Abelard does respond to Heloise's letter, but it is not a letter that looks towards the education of her soul, it points towards his own dire circumstances and the need for her prayers. He hopes that her supplications, along with the virgins of the Paraclete, will

prevail upon God to protect him in the adverse circumstances he finds himself at St Gildas. Fearing death, he requests his body be taken to the Paraclete where the prayers of Heloise and her nuns will help him on the other side. He begins with the address—

*To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, Abelard her brother in Christ*

The range of their relationship is tied down to a sibling bond in Christ, pared of all physical and earthly connections. It has a peculiar ordering, for he places Heloise first. The custom in letter writing was to put the dominant person ahead. He ends off the letter, fearing his own demise with the plea – ‘In Christ be mindful of me’ (*Letter II*). His comeback only compounds the confusion and anguish of Heloise: why had he put her name first; why was he increasing her fear of his death; why was he ignoring her heartfelt request for guidance and some inkling of care? By anticipating his death Abelard was torturing Heloise far in advance of the actual event – an event that no foresight could still the pain of. It unnecessarily extended her agony. All Abelard did in his writing to her is rail against his own misfortune, forgetting the agony he has left Heloise under.

Of all wretched women I am the most wretched, and among the unhappy I am the unhappiest. The higher I was exalted when you preferred me to all other women, the greater my suffering over my own fall and yours, when I was flung down; for the higher the ascent, the heavier the fall (*Letter III*).

Heloise needed no ascent of the learning soul, she had flown to the heights with Abelard, lifted on a wave of love into blissful union with her unique one.<sup>21</sup> Now all left her was the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Desnos captures this in a modern register for us in his great poem *No, Love is not Dead*. I quote a couple of lines:

The one I love has only a single name, a single form...  
 The smell of you and of your hair and many other things will still go on living in me,  
 In me, and I'm no Ronsard or Baudelaire,  
 Just me Robert Desnos who, for having known and loved you,

supreme bitterness of sorrow. It is a sorrow infernally compounded by the nature of the wound inflicted on Abelard. Heloise feels the necessity to do penance, but not towards God – her reparations run to Abelard for the pain of the wound he suffered. To God she cannot help but feel recrimination for an unjust deed inflicted on a man after he had married and made amends. Worse, her mind still darts towards the illicit pleasures she enjoyed with shudders of bliss. Heloise cannot find it within herself to do penance in front of God, the pleasures of Abelard stand in the way.

Wherever I turn they are always before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebrations of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers (*Letter III*).

Appearances were deceptive. By God causing Abelard's castration he was acting as a good doctor, healing by one strike at the body many wounds of the soul, allowing Abelard to enter the world of Grace with his body quietened. Heloise, by being left young and whole, her senses heightened by the many pleasures her body had experienced, was left in torment, longing for satisfactions forever beyond her. God could see into the darkness of her loins, see the lust rampant behind the everyday rituals of piety and prayer. All is pretence for Heloise, her veil a sham hiding a wanton body and a lewd mind. Her actions might speak of godliness, but her soul was filled with a craving for Abelard and a railing against God. The seriousness of her condition is highlighted by the fact that Heloise strongly believed in an ethic of intention rather than action, repentance was based on what a person was meaning to do rather than on the action or its result (something

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Is as good as they are.

Just me Robert Desnos who, for loving you

Doesn't want to be remembered for anything else on this despicable earth.

(Washburn and Major [1997] 1060–1061)

Abelard would use to great effect later in his own thinking on Ethics). Heloise was in as much danger as Abelard, except hers were all internal. He had not seen it because he was wrapped up in his own misery and was overly confident in her pious appearance and ability to get things done. She can only appeal to Abelard again, pleading for his help after the inadequacy of his first response. This time round surely he would not abscond from the task of guiding his student\lover out of misery and into some form of comfort – he owed her at least that much.

### **The Attempted Education of Heloise**

In his second letter to Heloise (*Letter IV*), Abelard seriously takes up the challenge of turning the love of Heloise away from himself and towards Christ, away from the lust of one mortal man towards the Eternal Love of the Son. He writes for her enlightenment, taking up her burdens and addressing her ‘complaints’ systematically. He begins by pointing out the reason why he addressed his letters with her name first. She had been raised from the lowly position of mortal marriage to the status of entering the nuptial chamber of the King of kings. Abelard goes back to the great love song of the Bible, the *Song of Songs*, and attempts to sing its song in a way that will heal Heloise of the damage his own love songs did her. It is a masterly move. He captures the complex value and meaning of Heloise’s experiences in the lines of the bride – ‘I am black but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem; therefore the king has loved me and brought me into his chambers’.<sup>22</sup> The self-castrated Origen used this Marriage Song to show how the learning

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<sup>22</sup> Bernard uses the same line to capture the nature of the church – its combination of sinfulness and goodness – and its union with Christ. In focusing on the journey of the individual soul towards God I am skewering a Christian tradition that mainly focuses on the *Church* and its relationship to Christ. The great thinkers are almost always aware of the social, economic, and political dimensions of the journey of a learning soul towards God, mainly thought through the workings of the Church. Bernard catches the complex unity of all the dimensions and how they are drawn together in Christ–

Christ the Lord is a mountain, a mountain gathered and rich. He is a mountain in sublimity, gathered in the bringing together of a multitude, rich in charity. Now see how he draws all things to himself, how he unites all things in unity, substantial, personal, spiritual, sacramental. He has the Father in himself, with whom he is one substance. He has the assumed humanity, with which

soul travelled from union of flesh to union of spirit, Abelard hoped to effect the same transformation on Heloise. He recognised that this great love song addressed the contemplative – rather than the wounded – soul, but the coarse, black habit of Heloise begins a series of links that ties her in to the destiny of truly loving Christ. Like the bride, Heloise is black without but lovely within. Her flesh has been blackened by the sun of misfortune, but the Son of God awaits her within with a love far greater than the lust of Abelard. Indeed it is his Grace that has burnt her skin, tormented her with tribulations, and humbled her aspirations to worldly delights. This resultant humility has made her beautiful and white within, keeping her light hidden and private. Because she is both black and lovely she will be chosen for that ‘secret place of peace and contemplation, and into the bed, of which she says elsewhere, ‘Night after night on my bed I have sought my true love’ (*Letter IV*).’ Heloise might lie on her bed wrapped in the images of Abelard, but her suffering destined her to finally reach beyond him into the True Love of Christ. The suffering of Heloise was part of the lesson taught by the greatest Teacher of all, a lesson in which she would learn to turn towards the love of Christ. Unlike Alcibiades who lay untouched in the bed of Socrates, Heloise has been touched by both her mortal and Divine teachers. One grabbed at her in lust, the other burnt her with suffering and touched her gently with compassionate love. For both Alcibiades and Heloise the lesson to be learnt was the same however – turn away from earthly desires and see with new eyes a greater Love and Beauty. Unlike Alcibiades, who was attracted to the Divine but just too busy with earthly pleasures to get there, Heloise was antagonistic towards the Divine, angry at a God who had inflicted such loss on her and her loved one. In order to turn the soul of Heloise towards the Son, she had to be convinced that what God had done was for the best. Abelard had to persuade Heloise that his castration, their break up, and their suffering, was part of a larger Plan of great value and pedagogical effect.

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he is one person. He has the faithful soul clinging to him, with whom he is one spirit. He has the one church of all the elect, with which he is one flesh (*Div* 33.8 quoted by McGinn [1994] 181)

We see here the integral thinking of Bernard, able to hold the multidimensionality of existence together in the quintessence of Christ, a mountain of sublimity that holds together the one and the many, the inside and the outside, the lowest and the highest.

He begins by pointing to the shamefulness of their deeds even *after* marriage, when Heloise was living in the cloister at Argenteuil and

I came one day to visit you privately, you know what my uncontrollable desire did with you there, actually in a corner of the refectory, since we had nowhere else to go. I repeat, you know how shamelessly we behaved on that occasion in so hallowed a place, dedicated to the most holy Virgin... What would do you suppose would satisfy God's justice for the profanation...of a place so sacred to his own Mother? (*Letter IV*).

Add to this the fact that they had made a mockery of Christianity by disguising Heloise as a nun. Furthermore they had plunged into fornication and lied to Fulbert. All of this deserved God's judgement. By Abelard being castrated and Heloise joining the very order she had mocked, were they not justly dealt with? Yet it was not God's *Justice* in action through these events, it was his *Grace*. Abelard and Heloise had shipwrecked themselves on each other, drowning unknowingly in a treacherous sea of desire, and the nets of God's Mercy had plucked them out of harms way by castrating Abelard. God had chosen Abelard for the incision, as his was the stronger lust and body.

Even when you were unwilling, resisted to the utmost of your power and tried to dissuade me, as yours was the weaker nature I often forced you to consent with threats and blows. So intense were the fires of lust which bound me to you that I set those wretched, obscene pleasures, which we blush even to name, above God as above myself (*Letter IV*).

This loss of a single piece of flesh led to an increase in the piety and goodness of Abelard, cutting him off from lust and opening him to Grace. It had taken only the chanting of a nursery rhyme and a verse from the Bible to convert Augustine, Abelard needed stronger measures. It was a cleansing rather than a deprivation. Unlike Origen,

who had incurred censure for his own mutilation, Abelard escaped these criticisms and received sympathy as Fulbert had unjustly performed the act on him, leaving him to declare 'Truly the Lord takes thought of me. I will go then and declare how much the Lord has done for my soul' (*Letter IV*).

Abelard may have justified how the Grace of God had achieved something for him, he still had to show how it worked in Heloise's case. One simple act had relieved Abelard of his physical baggage, Heloise was left in the full flowering of womanhood without the love of her life. The most difficult part of his pedagogical task still lay ahead. Heloise knew that she was the bride of Christ but it meant nothing to her, she loved Abelard. She had herself argued that Abelard's castration had freed him up to pursue a theological path. She would need something more. Abelard begins gently after his declaration of faith:

Come too, my inseparable companion, and join me in thanksgiving, you who were made my partner both in guilt and grace (*Letter IV*).

Their lives were intertwined. They had fornicated together, married together, converted together. God had used their lust and strategic machinations as techniques to teach them and lead them towards him. Abelard had insisted that Heloise take the veil because he did not want another man to touch Heloise after the loss of his manhood. It had forced her into the arms of Christ, a place she might otherwise have run from. In her position as Prioress she had given birth to many daughters in spirit rather than suffering the pain of giving birth to a few children in the flesh. She had 'turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary' (*Letter IV*). God's grace had descended on her as well as Abelard. It was a momentary punishment that avoided the necessity of eternal punishment. God had struck once and saved two souls.

The Grace of the Father established, Abelard still had to convince Heloise to shift from her love of him to a Love of Christ. He begins by describing how Jesus had suffered far

more than he had. Castration did not compare with Crucifixion. The one resulted from an act of lust, the other from an act of love. Christ had died for Heloise, and had wished it to be so for he loved Heloise far more than Abelard ever had. Abelard's writing becomes more urgent as he reaches the most important part of his attempt to turn Heloise towards the Son and away from him.

You are greater than heaven, greater than the world, for the Creator of the world himself became the price for you. What has he seen in you, I ask you, when he lacks nothing, to make him seek even the agonies of a fearful and inglorious death in order to purchase you? What I repeat, does he seek in you except yourself? He is the true friend who desires yourself and nothing that is yours... It was he who truly loved you, not I (*Letter IV*).

Abelard never loved Heloise the way that she loved him. He had used her for his own purposes, she had loved unconditionally and entirely; he had sought physical gratification in her body, she had sought nothing except for Abelard to become everything he could be. He had desired what Heloise could offer, she sought only Abelard as Abelard. If she was looking for a love equal to hers then Christ was the lover to turn towards, not Abelard. He had selfishly plunged her into sin-fullness and just as selfishly removed her from its carnal possibilities; Christ had died on the cross for her, willingly turning the instrument of his torture into a ladder for her soul to climb from transgression to holiness. Abelard had suffered far less for her, done it unwillingly, and turned it selfishly into a device of capture. If she was to mourn for anyone, it should be for her Holy Knight who redeemed her, not the scheming seducer who brought only depravity on her. The type of love Heloise had experienced for Abelard was unlike the lust he had experienced towards her. However, it was like another love, greater than hers, but based on the same principles, the love of Christ. Hers was an infinite love, and in hearing her infinite call and his own inability to respond, Abelard manfully turns her towards a love more infinite than her own.

Abelard buttresses this argument with a warning that her proclamations of love for him were coming close to losing their purity. The protestations of Heloise were tending to wallow in the fame and envy she had lost when her name was celebrated in the love songs of Abelard. She was loving what they had been, not who Abelard was.

I beg you, beware lest Pompey's reproach to weeping Cornelia is applied to you, to your shame: 'The battle ended, Pompey the great lives, but his fortune died. It is this you now mourn and loved' (*Letter IV*).

The admonition<sup>23</sup> is followed by Abelard's concluding argument. Heloise had become the bride of Christ. This gave Abelard access to her merit as he was married to her, once in the flesh, now in spirit. It twisted their roles around. Currently she was the master and he the servant for he relied on her superior access to Christ for his safety. That is why she should pray for him and his dire conditions at St Gildas. It was also an improvement on their previous state of affairs, for as a servant to Abelard, Heloise had been subjected by fear to his demands, now with Abelard as the servant of Heloise they were bonded by spiritual love, united in Christ. He ends the letter

Farewell in Christ, bride of Christ; in Christ fare well and live in Christ

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<sup>23</sup> It is the strongest admonition we find Abelard giving. In loving him for what he had offered her, the purity of her love fell under question. A critique of the love of Heloise could go further. In demanding a 'reward' for having loved Abelard so completely, she was twisting the nature of her love away from total devotion to him back towards her own needs, loving him for what he had done for her. She had lost the disinterested nature of her love (disinterest in self due to complete interest in Abelard) and replaced it with a claim that her disinterested love now deserved a reward – interest from disinterest, as if loving without strings was precisely what drew a cord around Abelard and entitled her to make claims on him. 'I have claims on you because I loved you without claim' is the logic, and however illogical such a demand is, it is all too human and understandable. Such a powerful human love is transcendent when reciprocal, when from the eyes of each pours a pure love for the other, and heartrending when one sided, a situation so often the case. The advice of Diotima and the ladder of Beauty again rings in the ears.

He offers her everything in Christ, nothing in himself. Her only access to him will have to take the path of Christ. Effectively it ends the *personal* communications between the two lovers. When Heloise writes back it is with requests for information about the history of Nuns and for advice on the running of the Paraclete. Abelard becomes the servant of Heloise, perpetually in her debt, unable to ever pay enough for the love she gave him. A voluminous outpouring of writing flows from him to her, for which we have no record of her thanking him, commentating on it, or even effectively using it.<sup>24</sup> She sends him requests for information with a reminder about the debt he owes her and the Paraclete, and then does not seem to use much of it. He had tried to use Divine Love to replace a human love he failed to give, and it left a lack in Heloise that no amount of intellectual writing on Divine Love could ever fill. It is ironic then, that a greater writer than Abelard on the nature of Divine Love was to bring about his ultimate humiliation. Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>25</sup> steps onto the scene.

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<sup>24</sup> His writing to her was extensive, covering a history of nuns in which he shows a remarkable sympathy for their profession and status, numerous sermons, beautifully composed hymns, answers to many difficult theological questions and a commentary on the depths of Genesis. We have no record of her thanking Abelard for these works. A sense of his overwhelming debt to her and the inadequacy of official and bureaucratic writing in the place of love letters hangs over the outpouring. There is increasing recognition of the intellectual as well as emotional impact Heloise had on the thought of her time – see Wheeler’s *Listening to Heloise: The voice of a twelfth century woman* (2000) for an excellent collection of essays on the influence of Heloise.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard (1090–1153) is the great speculative mystic of the twelfth century who managed to hold together the active and contemplative life – setting up reinvigorated Monasteries that were ‘schools of love’ leading towards the experience of God. At the age of 23, after an excellent literary education, he joined the Cistercian monastery of Citeaux with a number of friends and relatives. From this base the Cistercians flourished, with Bernard becoming the Abbot of a new foundation at Clairvaux at the young age of 25. By 1130 (at the age of 40) he was actively involved in the political and religious life of France, setting up new monasteries, recruiting converts, entering into strategic skirmishes against the Clunaics, setting up Popes, condemning heretics and encouraging the Crusades. Through all of this, Bernard was able to produce the most influential mystical text of the twelfth century, his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (*Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*). His other works include the carefully observed *The Steps of Humility and Pride* (*De*

### The Transcendent Love and Wrath of Bernard

Bernard begins his teaching with an analysis of the danger of pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake – the hazards of curiosity. It is the path of pride, the path of putting one's own interests and desires before that of God. Knowledge of things on earth and the substance of heaven should be hankered after not for fame, more students, or pure *curiositas*, but for one reason only – the salvation of the human soul. It is as if Bernard were directly addressing Abelard, whose pride and curiosity knew almost no bounds. With salvation as the goal, the first imperative is to secure the release of one's own soul before the upliftment of others can be embarked on. This education of the human soul begins with a turning away from the attractions of the earth or the light of heaven and a turning towards the nature of self. Know yourself. Journey inwards before attempting to lift yourself into heaven. As your guide on the journey take the statement of God that you were created in his Image and Likeness.<sup>26</sup> Look inside and see if there is anything resembling the Divine, anything that has something of the eternal and unchangeable attached to it, something that knows no destruction, something that is not touched or diminished by sin, something that is not improved by justice, decency and honour for it is already above these virtues. Bernard finds such a force in the nature of the Will, in the freedom to choose. It is a radical freedom – never compromised by the decisions it makes

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*gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*), the theological masterpiece *Grace and Free Choice (De gratia et libero arbitrio)*, the mystical work *On Loving God (De diligendo Deo)*, as well as numerous sermons and a sea of letters. Not without reason does he occupy the central role of leading Dante towards the final vision of God, as we shall see in the next chapter. So much of Dante is taken from Saint Bernard, so I hope the short shrift given to Bernard here is made up for in the story of the Divine Comedy.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard provides a number of different formulations of the image\likeness duo, depending on whether one relies on *Grace and Free Choice* or *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 80–82, but the differences fall under one recognizable pattern – that at one stage we were formed in the likeness of God; we then lost part of the likeness through sin; and now, because of the Incarnation, we are able to begin restoring the likeness before we finally meet with God again after death and are fully restored. See McGinn (1994) 168–172 for a good summary – as per usual.

– for no matter what the effect of the decision may be, the will remains to choose again. At the core of humanity lies an incorruptible openness untouched by all events, actions, desires, upliftments and glories, for it is precisely that which chooses between options. The options may become limited because of the choice, but that does not mean that the *ability* to choose is destroyed.<sup>27</sup> It is this Freedom we find deep inside ourselves that bears the stamp of God and retains his incorruptible sameness.

But all is not sweetness and light as we travel the interior path. We may carry the Image of God inside us untarnished as Pure Will, but we quickly discover that we have lost his Likeness. We bend towards earthly pleasures rather than the higher Good. Even worse, we find that when we do manage to choose The Good, our will lacks the power to carry out the choice. We land up declaring with Augustine ‘not yet’, leave us awhile in the land of Canaan, the cave of shadows. Our will, so free and undamaged in the ability to choose, seems hell-bent on choosing for Self and not for God. It egotistically pursues objects, fame, values, love and knowledge to increase the Self and not to increase the common good. Even when thinking about God and the nature of The Good the self congratulates itself on how righteous and informed it is becoming. The root of this bending of the Will towards the self lies in Pride and the secret to its straightening lies in Humility. This is the

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Freedom from necessity belongs to all reasonable creatures, whether good or bad, equally and indifferently with God. Nor is this freedom lost or diminished either by sin or by misery, nor is it greater in the righteous than in the unrighteous, or more complete in the angels than in men. For just as the consent of the human will, when grace turns it towards the good, becomes thereby freely good, and makes the man free in doing good, that is to say leads him to will it and does not force him to do it in spite of himself – so also the consent of the will, when spontaneously turned aside to evil, no less makes a man as free as spontaneous in evil doing, since he is brought to it by his will and not made evil by any coercion. And as the angels in heaven, and indeed God himself, remain good freely, that is to say of their own will and by no extrinsic necessity, so in just the same way the devil fell headlong into evil and there remains freely, that is to say in virtue of a voluntary movement and not of any external compulsion. Freedom of will subsists therefore even where thought is enslaved, and as fully in the wicked as in the good’ (*De gratia et libero arbitrio*, IV, 9, quoted by Gilson [1940] 47–48).

path trod by a learning soul guided by the Cistercians, a path Abelard consistently refused to take through all his humiliations, a path then forced on him by Bernard at Sens.

Abelard desired wisdom for himself, all his learning curved back towards his self, just as his love for Heloise was always dictated by his own desires. He never used his will for the love of others, it always circled back to himself, he willed for himself not for others. The counsel he used to decide matters depended on his interests, not the interest of others – he was prompted by self-interest not compassion. Even his letters to Heloise were written with an eye towards his own protection. Abelard had not learnt to fully love anyone but himself. His teaching might contain truth but what mattered was the *mode* of access. In being proud of what his reason could reveal, Abelard was cutting himself off from that which was greater than reason – in attempting to understand God for himself he was losing a God greater than his understanding. No matter how wise and logical the statements of Abelard, they lost their ability to turn him towards God for he used them to reveal how brilliant he was. In order for the words of wisdom to have their pedagogical effect they needed to be received in humility according to Bernard. Humility arises in the recognition that although we keep the image of God in our freedom, we have used this freedom to become unlike God – an unlikeness most clearly manifest in Pride. In the yawning chasm between image and likeness lies the foundation of humility. As the learning soul travels inwards and finds within itself a pure core of freedom, it also recognises how all the rest of itself is so different from this core. It is a humility that arises in the misery of comparison, a meekness that arises in despair. The vanity of the self is perceived in all its ugliness, especially when compared to the clear, unchanging beauty of free will, and even more so when the exemplar of Christ and his love for us is held against the blackness of our own motivations and selfishness. The wretchedness is compounded by our inability to do anything about it. We see how we have fallen away from a likeness to God, but do not seem to be able to will it differently or carry out the wish to become like God. The soul feels itself totally inadequate, any pretensions to understanding and action fall away under the sheer weight of iniquity. The soul begins to see how unlike God it has become. The part of itself that still retains the image of God

serves only to reveal how wide the gap has become, how far into the region of dissimilitude the soul has travelled. Freedom and entrapment hold equal sway and the pretensions of the soul feint away in the living of extremes. It is slowly pushed towards Sublimity.

An attainment of humility by the learning soul is the first step on the path to Enlightenment. It is learning the kiss of the feet before ascending to the kiss of the hand and kiss of the mouth (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 3). The second step involves a recognition that all of humanity labours under the same desolation. All have entered the region of unlikeness, travelling in exile from God even though they contain his Image deep within. All suffer. The second step leads to *compassion* as the learning soul sees deeply into the nature of human suffering on a massive scale. It results in the immediate desire to improve the lot of humanity through service, alms giving, and treading on the world lightly, taking only what is necessary for the body to survive and giving the rest to those more needy – the kiss of the hand. The soul begins to will what is best for all, not only for itself, it unbends from the selfish circle and opens itself to the suffering of all. The example of God incarnating himself into the world of suffering because of his love for us suddenly presents itself as the exemplar of Compassion. The novice on the path of Enlightenment loves Christ incarnate, uses him as the archetype to mould his actions on.<sup>28</sup> His will, always free to make choices, slowly becomes able to see the nature of The Good and begins to judge his own actions according to the standards of God, not of himself. His will begins to fall into accord with the Will of God. Slowly a likeness to God

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<sup>28</sup> To overcome carnal love of the body is a difficult thing. Bernard wisely suggests to the learning soul that to attempt a spiritual love immediately is strenuous for a being accustomed to physical things. Rather begin by loving Christ carnally, in his majestic incarnation, before attempting a deeper, spiritual love. It is as nail expelling nail, leaving the carnal love of Christ in place of a carnal love of self or other bodies. This love can then begin to work its healing inside (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 20 ). Bernard understands that there is work to be done in the shift from carnal to spiritual love and that the incarnation plays a crucial role in facilitating the shift. It is because God became man that man can become God – the classical chiasmic formula, if ever there was one.

begins to develop in the soul of the student. It is revealed in how the Will unbends itself under the influence of compassion, deciding from the position of all of humanity rather than from itself. It opens outwards, unfolds to the nature of reality, picking up on what the situation demands in its purity, rather than what the self makes of the situation. The will becomes spontaneous, totally responsive to whatever the situation demands as a whole rather than working from a contracted position of self-interest (Gilson [1940] 90). The will now functions without set criteria that force it into specific decisions, it freely works with continually changing circumstances according to what the situation demands. Each moment offers its own justification, the will decides and then lets go, waiting for the next moment, radically free, always deciding but not caught in the decision. In being totally responsive to the Other, fully open to them without preconditions, the foundation of disinterested love is laid. It is a love that seeks the Other purely for what the Other is.<sup>29</sup>

This work of love inside us begins to reformat us in the likeness of God (who is Love), and according to the rule of Like knows Like, the more we become like God the more we are capable of knowing God – of seeing and tasting him. Already the learning soul has learnt Humility through adopting the example of Christ and seeing how far away from

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<sup>29</sup> *On Loving God* gives an account of the four degrees of love on the road to becoming like God. Firstly we love ourselves for our own sake. Secondly, under the influence of the example of the physical love of Christ for us on earth and love of our neighbour, we shift towards loving God for what he has done for us – we love God for ourselves. Thirdly, as we get to understand God, we slowly begin to love God for who God is, not for what He has done for us. This stage takes a long time to reach perfectly, but eventually we love God totally for who He is, not for what he can do for us. This sets up the fourth level of love in which we again love ourselves, but this time with the love of God, not love of self. We love ourselves unselfishly. This last stage is supremely difficult if not impossible on this earth, according to *On Loving God*, but the later *Sermons on the Song of Songs* points to the brief experiencing of this meeting of divine love and human love before falling back into the third stage of loving God unselfishly. The best account of this last stage of Union is *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 7. It is astoundingly powerful and comes from a clear experiencing of non-duality. I cannot do it justice in this short exposition of Bernard's work, but in the descriptions of the highest levels of Union with God Bernard reaches heights that fully justify his recognition as a Saint. See McGinn (1994) 196–223 for a brilliantly conceived summary.

this exemplar he his. Christ facilitates our first step into religious transformation as He is closest to Humanity – God Incarnate – revealing to our judgement of ourselves the full extent of our unlikeness to God. In this correct and unpretentious seeing of ourselves we begin the work of reconstruction.<sup>30</sup> From Humility the learning soul opened itself to compassion and love, following the impetus of the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love between Father and Son. The Holy Spirit is the Love of God, and as we open ourselves out to disinterested love, we become more like the Threefold God in his second Aspect.<sup>31</sup> The learning soul is schooled in Humility and Love by the Word and the Holy Spirit. Our Reason, so used to making decisions based on self-interest, on being bent downwards to serve lust and desire, breaks away from these bonds and learns to decide and judge with the eyes of Eternity. Our Will, wrapped up in narcissism, used to deciding for self rather than for others, opens out in Love and Humility towards the suffering of humanity and spontaneously responds to what the current situation demands. Only now is the learning

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Thus then the Son of God, that is to say the Word and Wisdom of the Father, first sought out this intellectual faculty of ours which is called reason, oppressed by the flesh, a captive to sin, blinded by ignorance, and given up to things external. In his mercy He took it up, by his power He raised it, by his wisdom He taught it, and drawing it inwards, in a marvellous manner made use of it as his representative to sit in judgement on itself; so that for reverence to the Word with whom it was associated, it might act as its own accuser, witness and judge, thus executing upon itself the office of the Truth. From this first association between the Word and reason is born humility’ (*On the steps of humility and pride* VII, 21, quoted by Gilson [1940] 99–100).

<sup>31</sup> ‘We now come to that other faculty called will, contaminated indeed by the poison of the flesh, though this had already been in a measure counteracted by reason. This the Holy Spirit honours with a visit, sweetly purifies, and fills with ardour making it thereby merciful, so that after the fashion of a skin stretched by the application of an ointment, the will, now all suffused with the heavenly ointment, is expanded with affection even towards its enemies. And of this second association between the Spirit of God and the human will is born charity’ (*On the steps of humility and pride* VII, 21, quoted by Gilson [1940] 100–101).

soul (already like God in two aspects) ready to enter into the chamber of the King and experience the mystery of Union with God.<sup>32</sup>

Abelard treated Heloise as the bride of Christ because she was a nun. He celebrated her position as it secured him the ear of God through her, and he wanted to use her status to petition for his safety. The levels of learning that a soul went through to attain to the Chamber of the King were left unspoken. It was the exterior act of betrothal to Christ that had lifted Heloise into his presence, not the state of her soul. Bernard speaks from a very different position – he speaks from actually having experienced the Visit of the Word after being schooled in Humility and Compassion.

I confess to you that I have received the visit of the Word and indeed not once but many times; but although he has often come to my soul I have never been able to ascertain the exact moment of his entrance. I have been conscious of his presence within me. I can afterward recall that he has been present, sometimes I have even a presentiment of his coming; yet I have never perceived him either in the act of entering or in the act of retiring. Certainly he does not enter through the eyes for he has no colour, nor through the ears since he has no sound, nor through the organ of smell. For his mingling is with the mind not with the atmosphere. Neither does he gain admission through the avenue of the mouth, because he is not anything that can be eaten or drunk. The sense of touch is especially

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<sup>32</sup> 'There, when silence has been made in heaven for a space, it may be half a hour, she rests calmly in those dear embraces, herself indeed asleep, but her heart on the watch how while time lasts she may look into the hidden secrets of truth, on whose memory she will feast as soon as she returns to herself. There she beholds things invisible and hears things unutterable, of which it is not lawful for man to speak. These are the things that surpass all that knowledge which night showeth unto night. Yet day unto day uttereth speech, and it is permitted to us to speak wisdom among the wise and to express in spiritual terms those things that are spiritual' (*On the steps of humility and pride* VII, 21, quoted by Gilson [1940] 104–105). In this text we see the development of a trinitarian mysticism, the heights of which is union with the Father. In the later *Sermons* we see a focusing in on Union with Christ.

powerless to attain him since he is altogether intangible. By what then does he enter? Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that he does not enter at all, in as much as he is not any of the things which exist outside us? But neither can he be said to come from within me. I have ascended to what is highest in me and behold I have found the Word to be higher still! I have descended to explore the lowest depths of my being only to find that he was deeper still. I looked to the exterior, I perceived him beyond what is outermost; and if I turned my gaze inward, I saw him more interior than what is inmost. Then I realized the truth of what I read that 'In him we live, we move, and have our being.' Blessed is the soul in whom he is, who lives for him and is moved by him! (*Sermon on the Song of Songs* 74).

This is the man who Abelard crossed swords with, not a man who reasoned about the Trinity but a man illuminated within by the experience of God. Their orders of experience were different. Abelard pushed reason to its limits, using it to order and classify statements about God so that God became more understandable. Bernard did not want to understand God, or reason about the correct way to talk about him, Bernard wanted to experience God, come into contact with him, enter into Divine Union. His was a pedagogy of encounter not one of logic, a pedagogy of discovery not imposition. Bernard used the *Song of Songs* to guide the learning soul towards the Kiss of God, Abelard used the *Song of Songs* to avoid kissing Heloise, to argue with Heloise, to convince her that God loved her more than he. On the other hand, Bernard's commentary on the *Song of Songs* was successfully and practically used by many Souls on the path to becoming like God. Bernard was fruitfully setting up transformed monasteries throughout Europe based on a renewed contact with the Divine, Abelard could barely stay alive within his. Abelard, as great as his intellectual skills were, was about to come against a man destined to be a Saint.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> An excellent account of how the man and myth of Bernard have combined over the last 700 years is given by Bredero's *Bernard of Clairvaux: between cult and history* (1996).

Bernard was alerted to the possibly heretical nature of Abelard's writing by his friend, William of St Thierry.<sup>34</sup> Initially reluctant to pursue the matter because of his lack of expertise in Abelard's writings, he was persuaded to meet with Abelard to discuss the matter. A private encounter and then a meeting in front of witnesses was held, in which Bernard asked him to amend his books and take out the possibly heretical statements. Abelard agreed to the request, only to change his mind when his supporters encouraged him to engage in dialectical combat with Bernard and defeat him. Abelard's pride in his intellectual prowess, confidence in his ability to defeat Bernard, and conviction that his writings were not heretical, spurred him on to challenge Bernard to public debate on a day when King, Court, and dignitaries would be gathered at Sens for a display of the saintly relics of the Cathedral. Alarmed by Abelard's change of heart, Bernard initially refused to partake in the debate, fearful of meeting such a skilled dialectician on argumentative terrain. He was convinced by friends that his refusal would lead to Abelard's writings becoming even more popular, and so Bernard decided to face up to the greatest logician and debater of the day on an occasion that would already draw King, Court and Nobility to the Cathedral of Sens.

In order to defeat such a formidable disputer, Bernard decided to attack Abelard at his weakest point. Rather than attempt a critique of Abelard's theological writings, Bernard chose the route of character analysis. If the intellect of Abelard could not be beaten, his temperament and moral fibre certainly could. Abelard's pride knew no bounds. He was a man too pleased with himself, who used reason to scale up and down the hierarchy of being, claiming to illuminate the whole range with his words and teachings. 'I know not what there is in the heavens above or in the earth beneath which he deigns to know

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<sup>34</sup> The biographer and friend of Bernard, emerging in current research from underneath the shadow of Bernard as a great thinker and mystic in his own right. See his so called *Golden Epistle* (otherwise known as the *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei*) for an excellent introduction into the nature of medieval monastic spirituality.

nothing of' (*Letters of Bernard* 190, quoted by Clanchy [1997] 311). Abelard might have gone to the cathedral at Sens armed for intellectual debate, Bernard went ready to expose the soft underbelly of Abelard's disposition. Before arriving at the disputation Bernard fired off inflammatory letters to the bishops who were attending the gathering. These letters are masterpieces of demolition, turning what was to be a debate into the trial of a dangerous heretic who was spreading satanic ideas in public, who needed to be silenced before his pestilence spread out of control. As in the trial at Soissons nineteen years earlier (1121), Abelard arrived at the cathedral with the stake already loaded against him. Bernard had used the gathering of the prelates for supper the night before to establish that Abelard's teachings were indeed heretical. Over much wine and food, nineteen propositions of Abelard were read through, juxtaposed with quotes from the holy Fathers to reveal their sacrilege. When Abelard walked into the cathedral the next day, his writing had already been condemned the night before. The only question his accusers wanted answering was whether the heretical statements said to be held by Abelard were indeed held by him. It was an inquisition, not a debate. Abelard entered the Sens cathedral – overflowing with Royalty, Nobility and dignitaries – already a marked man. Yet Abelard still had a chance in the contest. He had supporters in the Cathedral. All he had to do was show how the statements (already agreed to be heretical) were not accurate reflections of his writing, that they were over-simplifications, misunderstandings, gross exaggerations. Yet at the cumulating moment, with all gathered around to witness the great dialectical skill of Abelard in debate, with all waiting for the greatest philosopher in the world to reveal his mettle, Abelard's mind left him. 'His memory became very confused, his reason blacked out and his interior sense forsook him'.<sup>35</sup> The very instrument Abelard had used with such pride to travel through the heights and depths of existence abandoned him at the moment he needed it most. Abelard fell silent. Unlike the mystical quietness of the final levels of enlightenment of which nothing can be said, Abelard experienced the muteness of confusion. He lost his famed self-confidence and became bewildered. Abelard was unable to use the weapon he had wielded with such dexterity against his

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Geoffrey of Auxere, the biographer of Bernard, taken from Clanchy (1997) 312.

opponents, with such surgical precision in analysing Theology, and with such tenderness in writing to Heloise. He refused to make any statements and said that he would appeal directly to the Pope before walking out, protected from the surprised onlookers by his supporters.<sup>36</sup>

At the previous trial at Soissons Abelard had been forced to read from the Athanasian Creed in tears, this time he decided to address his confession of faith to the one person who had meant something to him – Heloise. With his whole world crumbling, his powers fading, he turned to the person who loved him most.

Heloise my sister, once dear to me in the world, now dearest to me in Christ, logic has made me hated by the world. For the perverted, who seek to pervert and whose wisdom is only for destruction, say that I am supreme as a logician, but am found wanting in my understanding of Paul. They proclaim the brilliance of my intellect but detract from the purity of my Christian faith. As I see it, they have reached this judgement by conjecture rather than weight of evidence. I do not wish to be a philosopher if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be an Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ... I embrace in the arms of faith him who acts divinely in the glorious flesh of a virgin which he assumed from the Paraclete. And so, to banish fearful anxiety and all uncertainties from the heart within your breast,

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<sup>36</sup> Why Abelard did this is open to debate. Berenger (one of his supporters) likens Abelard's silence in front of his accusers to that of Christ, but this seems to me to be a rationalization after the fact. All commentators on the trial are agreed that Abelard became bewildered. This raises questions about any attempt to justify Abelard's actions as being strategically astute. By appealing to the Pope (Innocent II), he was appealing to a man who was deeply in Bernard's debt for the consolidation of his position as undisputed leader of the Catholic Church. Abelard may have had friends in Rome, even future popes, but the current Pope was indebted to Bernard. I cannot see how Abelard's appeal was a brilliant side step manoeuvre, it has the flavour of a desperately confused old man. Abelard may have gathered his wits afterwards, but this was then making the best of a bad situation.

receive assurance from me, that I have founded my conscience on that rock on which Christ built his Church (*Abelard's Confession of Faith*).

Not defeated yet and determined to put his case, the aging Abelard and his entourage limped towards Rome to secure a fair hearing. Bernard's venomous letters reached the Pope and cardinals before him and convinced them to condemn Abelard without trial. Abelard was declared a Heretic for the second time in his life. He was condemned to continuous silence, his books were to be burned, and his followers excommunicated. The news of his condemnation reached Abelard as he was resting from his journey at Cluny under the hospitality of Peter the Venerable.<sup>37</sup> He had been routed by Bernard, utterly destroyed. There he died quietly, eighteen months later. His body was sent to the Paraclete where it lay alone for another twenty-one years before the body of Heloise was laid down in rest next to his.

### Closing

The love of one unique individual, the love of abstraction, and the love of God unhappily mix in this famous tale. We do not have a ladder of beauty easily ascended, rather a refusal of each to come to terms with the other. It presents us with an analysis of the dangers of loving one segment of the ladder too much. Singular love opens the lover out to betrayal, disappointment, and rejection as well as ecstasy, elevation and joyous mingling. Intellectual abstraction may open the world and the heavens for analysis but it

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<sup>37</sup> Abelard was blessed to have landed up under the care of this exceptionally kind man. Not only did Peter arrange for the reconciliation of Bernard and Abelard but also managed to secure the re-admittance of Abelard to the church in 1140. He wrote some beautifully judged letters to Heloise after the death of Abelard and personally brought her his body for burial. Bernard had the utmost respect for him, even though they came from different orders, entering into somewhat acrimonious negotiations with him over the disputes between the Cistercians and Clunians in 1144. It is he who is responsible for the epitaph to Abelard as 'The Socrates of the Gauls, Plato of the west, our Aristotle, prince of scholars..., the keen thinker and dialectician who won the greatest victory when he renounced all for the true philosophy of Christ (Radice [1974] 42).

does so at the cost of replacing the real with a model and the peril of loving the image more than its reality. Divine love might leave the soul ravished and open, but it risks refusing the complex uniqueness of the world in all its dark beauty and the quest of reason to understand the magnificence of existence. Heloise, the great lover of Abelard, Abelard the great lover of his own intellect,<sup>38</sup> and Bernard, the great lover of God leave us discomforted, the claims of each still ringing convincingly in our ears, the suffering of their meeting a warning to any learning soul undertaking an education towards becoming like Being. Yes

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<sup>38</sup> Abelard even based his theories about the love of God on Heloise's love of him – an ultimate, if misplaced, tribute (Gilson [1940] Appendix II).

## Chapter Nine: Dante<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Why Dante? The period between the writings of Abelard/Heloise/Bernard and Dante cover just over a century and a half but contains one of the richest seams of texts according to the criteria of this thesis. Firstly there is the work of Bernard's friend, William of St. Thierry, especially his *Golden Epistle* which provided a clear guide to the learning soul within the monastic tradition, travelling from the animal to the rational and finally to the spiritual levels of education. With Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* we have a profound example of how this period attempted to take the learning soul on a path towards God using structured images and narrative. This becomes even more apparent in one of Hugh's followers, the brilliant Richard of St. Victor. He used the story of Jacob and his twelve sons to guide the learning soul into a oneness with God with *The Twelve Patriarchs*. In *The Mystical Ark* he uses this archetypal symbol to provide one of the most thorough pedagogic guides to the art of contemplation written up to the middle of the twelfth century. Then there is the path breaking writings of Hildegard of Bingen in the middle of the twelfth century that introduce us to a feminine account of the journey of the learning soul towards God, using her own visions as pedagogic tools. Another using visions for pedagogic effect was Joachim of Fiore who worked powerfully within an apocalyptic genre and had a powerful effect on moderns such as Yeats and Jung. See Reeves *Joachim of Fiore and the prophetic future* (1999) for a superb account. Towering above these stands the work of Aquinas (1225–1274), especially his *Summa Theologiae*, which guides the learning soul to the ultimate goal of *visio beata*. Unfortunately for the thesis, Aquinas' style of writing was not of a narrative ilk, preferring a more scholastic question-answer model. No doubt there is a clearly articulated journey of the learning soul in the *Summa* but it would have been difficult to write it in a story mode. More within the conditions of this thesis was the work of Bonaventure, especially *The soul's journey into God*. If Aquinas stirred the mind then Bonaventure inflamed the heart, the two together providing a medieval duo to the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. Finally there are the great texts of the female mystics of late Medievalism. To mention only two – Mechthild of Magdeburg's (1207–1282) *Flowing Light of the Godhead* used the bridal mysticism of *Song of Songs* to tell the story of her own path towards God. Marguerite Porete (?–1310) tells of her journey from the valley of humility to the mountain of contemplation in her *Mirror of Simple Souls*. These texts are exceptionally original and were a major influence on Meister Eckhart, the master guide of the learning soul on its way to God. All of the above is beautifully traced in McGinn's *The growth of Western Mysticism* (1996) and *The flowering of Western Mysticism* (1998). Yet what struck me about Dante was how much of the above was already contained within his great poem. Most of the themes and images from the above texts occur in *The Comedy* in a highly synthesized form, but more importantly they are held together in the most gripping of narratives. Dante writes a journey of the learning soul in a form never equalled before or since. It is the greatest poem in the western tradition on this topic, taking the reader on an imaginal journey of unsurpassed depth and height and educating him throughout. It is primarily an education through the imagination rather than the will, intellect or heart, although these other modes do play a role. With vivid imagination often comes

## Opening

And Dante<sup>2</sup> attempted to educate the human soul through a poem. He forged the various ancient and medieval journeys of the learning soul towards The Good into one unique

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astounding mnemonic force, and although I do not cover this fifth mode in detail within this doctorate, Dante works with memory in exceptional ways. Finally, like Plotinus and Augustine, Dante sits at the end of one great era and the beginning of another. His poem is the great *summa* of medieval reflection, but also contains within it the surging energies of post-medieval challenges – vernacular language, individual focus, radical critique of both church and state, celebration of unique and original spiritual experience through personal forms. All of these factors made the *Comedy* an obvious choice for this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Durante Alighieri (1265–1321) was born in Florence, married Gemma Donati around 1283 (she has the privilege of not being mentioned in any of his works), was exiled from his beloved city in 1302, wandered through Europe alone and poverty stricken, dependent on charity, while writing what is considered to be the greatest Christian poem of western civilization – *La divina commedia*. He was born into a noble Florentine family that had Roman origins, although by his father's time the family was mainly involved in money lending. Dante however, was not interested in making money, from a young age he became involved in the cultural and poetic world of Florence. He fell under the influence of Brunetto Latini, who taught him the skills of ornate Latin prose, of philosophical writing, and of transforming his vernacular Italian into poetry. Dante was also influenced by Guido Calvalcanti, who wrote intellectualised love poems about the irrational and distressing force of love. Yet he quickly transcended this formalized angst with a new style that wrote from the heart about the effects of love on his soul. He could do this because of a young woman in Florence by the name of Beatrice who revealed through her very glance the nature of Love, leaving the young Dante trembling in her wake. She tragically died in 1290, and in his search for consolation Dante found 'Lady Philosophy' as well as the arms of other women. He immersed himself in authors such as Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Statius, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Boethius, Averoes, Bonaventure, Magnus, and the great Aquinas, while producing a book of love poems stitched together with an account of the development of his love for Beatrice, the *Vita nuova*. It ends with a recognition that he is not yet able to fully capture the Divine Love she revealed to him and promises to return with words so beautiful and profound as to transcend what has been written of any women before. Dante not only immersed himself in Philosophy but increasingly became involved in the factional disputes of Florentine politics. By 1300 he was actively involved in the increasingly vicious infighting of papal and imperial factions struggling for dominance over one of the fastest growing and richest cities of Europe. He was on the losing side. Accused of supporting an imperial plot to takeover Florence and the mismanagement of public funds, he was condemned to death and effectively exiled. He finally found some peace in Bologna (1304) where he began

vision that stands unrivalled in its combination of pedagogy and poetry. *The Ladder of Beauty*, shifting ever upwards in inclusive spirals from the individual to the universal, finds its embodiment in Beatrice – Dante’s physical and spiritual love. The failure of *Alcibiades* to learn from the wise Socrates is corrected by a pedagogical path that takes the learner through the effects of pride and sensuality in a horrific journey through the depths of hell. After such a journey even the magnificent Alcibiades would have turned gratefully to the mount of purgative practice for fear of meeting his own shade standing in a burning coffin. *Plato’s Cave* with its flitting shadows is magnified into countless shades agonizingly caught in their uncontrolled desires; the pilgrim’s journey up the steep slope of the cave towards the light is amplified into a massive mountaineering expedition up the cliff faces of Purgatory; his seeing of The Good at the mouth of the cave is expanded into a journeying through the heavens and a glorious vision of God. *Philo’s Exodus* of the learning soul out of Egypt, into Canaan and Chaldea, and finally through Haran into the Wilderness where a vision of God awaits the Abrahamic man, finds greater poetic and allegorical luminance in Dante’s great travels down into the bowels of

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extensive writings on the nature of language (*De Vulgari eloquentia [DVE]*) and philosophy and politics (*Convivio [Conv]*). Expelled from Bologna in 1306, Dante was forced to continue his wanderings. Yet all his suffering seemed destined to end when Henry of Luxembourg came to power in ‘Germany’ in 1308. Dante was convinced that the Holy Roman Empire needed to be re-established as a means to ensure peace and stability in Europe and Italy, and he felt that Henry VII was the man for the job. In the *Monarchia* Dante set out his vision of Empire and its relationship to the Church. Both Pope and King received their authority straight from God, and thus were autonomous powers, one devoted to earthly justice, the other to spiritual fulfilment. For either to interfere in the functions of the other was blasphemy. Henry VII was not able to deliver on his promise however, dying young and leaving Dante’s political optimism and dream of Empire destroyed. But with the initial hope of *Pax Romana* came something else. Dante abandoned the writing of *Conv.* and *DVE* and began writing the *Comedy*. Only poetry would be good enough to capture the profound vision bursting within him. Imagining himself back at a crucial turning point of his life in 1300, just before exile and perpetual roaming, Dante took himself on a different journey, one through the after life that led to transcendence and enlightenment rather than poverty and disillusionment. He found protection for this great project under the wing of Can Grande della Scala in Verona and stayed there until 1318, when he moved to Ravenna and was reunited with his children. There, soon after finishing the *Comedy*, he was struck down by Malaria and died, aged 57, his life sacrificed to a Poem. See Mazzota’s ‘The Life of Dante’ in Jacoff’s *The Cambridge companion to Dante* (1995) 1–14 for a succinct overview.

earth and up into the stars. *Origen's Song of Songs*, expressing the lifting up of the soul to Christ in a trembling kiss of the mouth, is transformed into the love song of Dante to Beatrice and the account of how she guides him towards a face to Face meeting with the Beloved. The *Plotinian journey of the alone to the Alone* is gracefully supplied with helpful guides in the form of Virgil, Beatrice and Saint Bernard, assisting the learning soul in its difficult journey through the various levels. Even the great Christian text on conversion, Augustine's *Confessions*, finds itself swept up in a greater creative vision of a soul's journey towards God.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the *Historica calamitatum* of Abelard, the tragic love letters of Abelard and Heloise, and the vicious judgement of Bernard find their affirmative parallel in Dante. Rather than the failed intellect of Abelard crushed by Bernard at Sens, we have the Saint gently guiding Dante towards the final vision; rather than the heartrending letters of Abelard and Heloise we have the triumphant love of Dante for Beatrice, lifting him through the adoration of one person into the heights of the Divine. The *Divine Comedy* exists as the quintessential expression and synthesis of ancient and medieval learning on the journey of the learning soul towards God. Yet it also sits on the cusp of a new era of human experience caught in that inadequate phrase, Renaissance, for Dante gives a strikingly individualist account of his journey: imaginatively creating his own Inferno; placing infidels in heaven and popes in Hell; giving pride of place in his spiritual enlightenment to a little known lass from Florence; using the pagan Virgil as his guide through two thirds of the experience and then the self same lass for his guide through the heavens. It is his own inimitable vision, written in his own vernacular, and in this particularity he anticipates the founding of all learning in the uniqueness of the individual and the celebration of national culture. Dante stands at the midpoint between all our ancient and medieval lore, so forgotten and misunderstood, and the familiarity of the modern experience of ourselves as individuals, empowered by rights, obligated by duty, in a world that clearly separates the interlocking spheres of

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<sup>3</sup> A good comparison of Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Comedy* can be found in Paolini's *Confessions of sin and love in the middle ages: Dante's Commedia and Augustine's Confessions* (1982).

state, religion and culture. To understand Dante is to catch in one deep breath the meeting of ancient, medieval, and modern attempts to teach the learning soul how to travel through the depths and heights of human experience.

Dante begins the *Divine Comedy* with an account of how he *came to himself* (*Inf.* I, 1–3). It is the classical experience of conversion, of turning around from the outside world and entering the darkness of our own selves. Dante had spent many nights, when the eyes of others were closed in sleep on the pillow of eternity, with his own eyes gazing fixedly at the dwelling of his beloved, awake to sleep.<sup>4</sup> But even though he knew this interior path, has seen with closed eyes the beauty that dances, he had become ‘full of sleep’ and abandoned the ‘true way’, neglecting the inner journey and immersing himself in the fulfilments of the sensual and political world. Yet after a night of anxious tossing in the lake of his heart, things finally became ‘a little calmer’, allowing Dante to again step onto the shore that leads inwards and upwards. Like the Israelites turning around to see if the chasing Egyptian army had caught them after they crossed the Red Sea, so Dante turns around, his mind still chased by anxious fears, to see if the furies have left him alone and free to turn his eyes upwards.<sup>5</sup> Resting for a while, and steadying his breath, Dante begins

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<sup>4</sup> *Conv* 3, 1, 3. One of the most important criterion for determining the levels of internal exploration reached is the level of awareness reached at night in the various stages of ‘sleep’. There is a kind of wakeful sleep, where in total quiet and rest, contemplation of The Good, the Beautiful, and the True occurs. In this state, the contemplative rests in a looking inwards that is also upwards, at the ‘dwelling of his beloved’, waiting for a glimpse of the Divine. In this resting quiet there is full, but still, consciousness. To fall into unconscious sleep is to lose this state, and to lose the ability to contemplate the Divine. To be wakeful at night, but not in that restful calm, rather in an anxious tossing of thoughts, is also to lose the ability of contemplation. The difficult task is to quiet the mind to the point of stillness where it can watch itself, work with its own darkness, smooth the tempest, and then wait for the Light. I would speculate that this experience of the contemplative, borne out in both east and west sits behind the opening scene of the *Comedy*. An excellent poetic account of this experience can be found in Novalis’ *Hymns to the Night* (1998) and a sustained novelistic treatment in the opening of Proust’s *In search of lost time* (2001). Wilber, in *One taste* (1999) gives an extensive descriptive account of the nature of this extended consciousness over a one year period.

the journey inwards toward The Good, the Beautiful and the True. Gone is the dark wood and the turbulent sea, replaced with a world moved by Divine Love, touched by the rising Sun. Yet as soon as he attempts the ascent he meets with resistance, he cannot sustain the quiescent state, the she-wolf of restlessness comes at him, making his own mind restless, driving him back, little by little, into the sea of anxiety and the dark wood of sin, 'to where the sun is silent'. Such is the falling back experienced by Dante, an account that Plotinus, Augustine, Bernard, and all others who have tasted the Divine before falling outwards, resonate with. Dante cannot sustain the vision, he returns back to the sunless depths. His proud attempt to ascend to the heights on his own strength fails. As he falls downwards in the great, silent, emptiness, back out of himself, he sees a figure and cries out in desperation, 'Have pity on me'.<sup>6</sup> It is the shade of Virgil, sent to help by Grace above. As Augustine experienced Grace in the chanting of a child, so Dante is also assisted, only it is in the form of the pagan poet who has been sent by Dante's beloved to save him. The path of Augustine is not to be the path of Dante, although both parallel their conversion on Christ.<sup>7</sup> Dante is destined to follow a darker path that descends into Hell before he will again begin the ascent towards the Son. First he must clearly discern the full nature of sin within and its consequences before attempting purgation. The very attempt to ascend to the heights on his own reveal his pride filled nature and the necessity of the task. Now he will have to see how people live the consequences of their lives in

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<sup>5</sup> See C. S. Singleton, 'In Exitu Israel de Aegypto' in Freccero's *Dante: A collection of critical essays* (1965) pp102–121, for a path breaking discussion of the motif of conversion in the *Comedy*.

<sup>6</sup> As noted by Heilbronn-Gaines in '“Inferno” I: Breaking the Silence' found in Musa's *Dante's Inferno* (1995) p292, Dante combines Latin and Italian in this cry. The Beginning of the penitential psalm 50 begins *Miserere mei*. Dante keeps the first word and translates the second into Italian, resulting in *Miserere di me*, combining the rich Wisdom language of Latin with the fresh vernacular of Italian in one song to God. If David, the great sinner and repentant could be redeemed, then there was hope for Dante

<sup>7</sup> Augustine uses the experiences of Christ throughout the *Confessions*, the most obvious being Christ's tears in the garden of Gethsemane informing Augustine's account of his conversion in a Milanese garden. Dante sets up the time sequence of the *Comedy* to follow that of Easter – he descends into Hell on Easter Friday of 1300 and rises to the Heavens on Easter Monday. In both the Christology is muted but pervasive.

eternal hopelessness, and experience his own heart of darkness, before he can attempt the ascent again. Only once the consequences of pride and self-love are seen in their many torments will Dante be able to quiet his self enough to attempt the purification needed for the ascent towards God. In a moment of clarity Dante sees the full extent of the task he has to undertake – a travelling through the darkness of sin to see its true character, a purification of these sins in preparation for the greatest journey, a journey towards a final seeing of The Good beyond, and informing, all being. The magnitude of the calling washes him away, especially as he wishes to express it *in beauty*. He is not an Aeneas, called to the depths of Hades in order to gain insight into founding the greatest empire on earth. Nor is he a Paul, shown the heights of heaven to confirm the founding of the greatest religion on earth (*Inf.* II, 31–3). And so on the dark shore, barely safe from his fearful heart, Dante, in anticipating the enormity of his task, over thinks himself, and freezes in the moment of action. Only the thought of the most beautiful manifestation of Divinity on earth that Dante has ever seen, his beloved Beatrice, steadies his will. Success in the endeavour would mean again experiencing, in fullest form, the divine beauty he saw streaming out of her when she was alive. As a flower rising to the dawn, so Dante responds to the thought of the divine love manifested so clearly in his Amor, and with Virgil as his guide,<sup>8</sup> their wills as one, he undertakes to enter the steep, tree shadowed way downwards into the abyss of Sin, into the Dark's heartache.

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<sup>8</sup> The reasons behind Dante the poet choosing Virgil as his guide has occasioned much discussion. See G. P. Raffa's 'Dante's Beloved Yet Damned Virgil', in *Dante's Inferno* (1995) 266–285 for a useful introduction. There are three main reasons: Virgil articulated the founding of Dante's ideal goal in political philosophy – an enlightened and universal monarchy (Rome) protecting mankind and allowing the successful dissemination of Christianity; Virgil described the journey of Aeneas into the underworld (*Aeneid* VI), paralleling that of Dante the wayfarer; Virgil was seen as a Prophet, predicting the coming of Christ in the fourth *Eclogue* – Empire, Underworld, Prophet (Musa [1995] 266). Yet Virgil is a doomed pagan with limited insight, and as the *Comedy* progresses we see him struggling to comprehend the great Christian insights into the depths of Sin and the heights of Glory. Such humanity makes him one of the most loved characters of the *Comedy*.

## Inferno

His clarity of mind and purpose do not last for long. Initially it is bolstered by the knowledge that he is entering a place where people have ‘lost the good of the intellect’ (*Inf.* III, 18) and it is precisely this reasoning intellect, embodied by Virgil, that is guiding him with poetic force through the dark lands and comforting him. Even the first group of sufferers that he meets serve only to encourage him, for they are those who have ‘lived without praise or blame’, ‘not rebellious, not faithful’. Both heaven and hell reject their apathy, and Virgil hurries Dante past them, not even deigning to talk about them. They ‘never truly lived’, and now are chased endlessly about, stung into action by wasps and hornets, in a place where neither mercy or justice cares for them. They refused to commit to anything, good or evil, existed in a paralysis of indecision and apathy, and as such only deserve the shallowest and most contemptible place in Hell. All this can only encourage Dante the wayfarer, who might be rash in his undertaking, but certainly is beginning to break through the lethargy of his life with this journey. Yet his equanimity does not last for long. He reaches the river of Acheron and there sees the masses of the naked damned, waiting to cross over the livid marsh on the boat of Charon, strangely eager for their punishment to begin. They desire to be where they are, for they have fixed themselves into perverted patterns through their own free will, and wish nothing but its repetition. God’s justice is to fix them in the correct consequences of their actions forever, and so they wait on the shore for Charon to ferry them across to the truthful enactment of their sins in a dark karma constructed to logically fulfil their own desires.<sup>9</sup> Dante cannot hold this entering into the dark recesses, a gust of pure despair from the tearful ground overcomes him and he falls into sleep once again.

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<sup>9</sup> This is *contrapasso* (retribution) – the punishment of a sin by a process that fulfils the deep consequences of that sin. The lustful are caught in a whirlwind, thieves have their own bodies stolen from them, heretics stand in the middle of a burning plain cursing God. Sometimes the punishment is a direct inversion of the sin, like when the indecisive are continually forced to chase a banner, but in the main the sinners find themselves forever locked into the logic of their sins without wishing it to be any other way. They are entering the sum of their past deeds. See Cassell’s *Dante’s Fearful Art of Justice* (1984) for an extended meditation on how this concept plays out in the *Inferno*.

Sustained awareness of the depths is hard to maintain for the wayfarer, but he is called by Grace and so he *comes to himself again*, only this time in Limbo, a place of preparation and strengthening, but also of limitation and temptation. His mind feels refreshed, his vision steady. He meets with the great poets of antiquity and receives recognition for his own great gift as they welcome him into their circle, making him a sixth among the wise (*Inf.* IV, 102). How easily Dante the wayfarer accepts the compliment. He will only feel the inadequacy of this accolade when finally seeing God. In their company he walks towards a splendid castle of light in darkness, surrounded by seven walls and simply enters. He sees the great heroes of the past, feels exalted at their presence, steadying himself for the hero's quest into the Dark and the Light. Finally he sees the gifted philosophers of Antiquity, headed by Aristotle,<sup>10</sup> and is bolstered by their wisdom. Succoured by the best of *human* beauty, courage and wisdom, Dante is finally able to attempt a more sustained entering into the circles of Hell. He has seen the finest that natural reason and humanism can offer without the descending grace of God. It is a beautiful castle of natural virtue and wisdom, but it breathes the air of inadequacy, the air of incompleteness, cut off from the Glory of God and inside the gates of Hell. Reason

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<sup>10</sup> It is Aristotle, not Plato, who dominates philosophy in the later middle ages, especially with the reintegration of his work by Aquinas. Dante used Aristotle as the great authority on how to live a virtuous life in this world. Aristotle is practical and down to earth, he wants to get at Forms within the Concrete, and is unhappy with Forms existing in another world as perfect prototypes, where things in this world are imperfect imitations. Aristotle brings the Forms to earth, makes them *abstractions* of the human mind that have no other existence apart from *in* the actual objects. This formulation has the beauty of simplicity in comparison to Plato's ever expanding Formal Universe. It also has the merit of focusing on Becoming, on how the potential becomes actual, on how the phenomenal world furnishes the primary reality from which we work with secondary abstractions. Aristotle works with the things given to us, and as such is the Ideal Representative of Earthly Philosophy on how to live a good, well balanced, life. But this is not all that Dante takes from Aristotle. The formulation of the Unmoved First Mover and Aristotle's cosmology are picked up and used in a Neo-Platonic manner in the *Paradiso*, giving much imaginative resonance to the journey into the heights. See Wickstead's *Dante and Aquinas* (1971) as well as Gilson's *Dante and Philosophy* (1949) for good discussions of Aristotle's relationship to Dante.

may prepare the learning soul for the path to enlightenment with its seven liberal arts and seven virtues, but it is a limited grounding. It is a light caught in the darkness of human sin, and needs the greater light of revelation to illuminate the black skull surrounding it.

Dante's temperament and intellect are not greatly *tempted* by the apathetic or the ancient, and so he moves fairly easily through these realms, but the circle of those who have subjected their reason to their lust presents Dante with his first great test, for he has subjected love to carnal desire in his past. He sees a great flock of shades, driven and buffeted by winds more tempestuous than their earthly desires, forever doomed to flight in the 'black air' of their desire. Two shades seem especially romantic, flying together, 'light upon the wind'. Dante calls to them and they fly over to him. They sense his empathy and respond to it, with the female shade talking. 'O gracious and benign living creature, that comes to visit us, through the dark air, if the universe's king were our friend, we, who tainted the earth with blood, would beg him to give you peace, since you take pity on our sad misfortune'. It is an empty wish, they are not friends of God, nor will they bring peace to Dante the wayfarer. Rather they wish to destroy his strength of mind. Yet Dante is new in Hell, he is quickly caught in the tragic tale of illicit love and a vengeful husband murdering both lovers together, and wonders what first stirred their affair, what first twisted their love into its carnal outpouring. Francesca says she will 'be like one who weeps and tells' about the first 'root' of their love.

We read, one day for pastime of Lancelot, how love constrained him. We were alone and had no misgiving. Many times that reading drew our eyes together and changed the colour in our faces, but one point alone it was that mastered us; when we read that the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, he who never shall be parted from me, all trembling, kissed my mouth. A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it; that day we read no farther (*Inf.* V, 124–135).

A fictional romance unbuttoned them, they were urged on by fantasy into mimicking the actions of brave Lancelot kissing the enchanting Guinevere in the garden. As she so

subtly hints, that day they read no more, fiction had become reality. Plato would have nodded his head at this warning against the corrupting influence and imagination of artists. Dante the poet is an artist, but one who understands the seductive effect of romantic fiction on his readers, of dark confession on the veins, and by this scene is reminding them of the dangers of high fantasy. Yet the evocative power of this scene has seduced more readers than it has let through. Paolo and Francesca became the most famous couple of the *Comedy*, generating more commentary and artistic renditions than any other scene.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly too powerful for Dante the wayfarer. As he listens to Francesca's account, he notices the silent Paolo weeping next to her, totally conquered by his love for her. He is a shade of a shade next to the prevailing Francesca, symbolic of all men who, with trembling lips, have given up themselves to be devoured by physical love on the first rung of the Ladder of Beauty. Dante the wayfarer falls like a dead body at their feet, unable to resist the charm of their story, himself caught in the power of romantic love and the attraction of carnal desire. Dante *the poet*, however, understands the full development of the Ladder of Beauty and is not trapped in its physical embodiment or its romantic fictions. This is shown by him making Francesca get the knightly romance wrong – in the actual version he worked with it is Guinevere who kisses Lancelot. Furthermore it was not even Guinevere who did the seducing, but an evil enchantress in her form.<sup>12</sup> Effectively this means, if they acted out the scene, that

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<sup>11</sup> I follow the modern tendency to give a negative reading of Francesca. She is the first sinner to be encountered by Dante the wayfarer, and occupies the same position as Eve tempting Adam. To make her an evil, lying, conniving, devouring temptress is to take things a little far, however. She seems to suffer from a state of mind that comes from living in a world of romantic fictions, she makes things up to suit her needs and desires. Yet all the sweet fictions of the world cannot hide the real act of adultery they have committed. See Mark Musa's excellent discussion in 'Behold Francesca Who Speaks So Well' in *Dante's Inferno* (1995) pp310–324 as well as Poggioli's extended meditation on the scene in 'Paolo and Francesca', found in Freccero (1965) pp61–77.

<sup>12</sup> Regrettably I have left out how the Arthurian legends have contributed to the education of the learning soul, but a useful place to begin mapping its huge influence is Richard White's *King Arthur in legend and history* (1998).

Francesca seduced Paolo, much like Eve led Adam into the first sin. Webs of deceit and temptation are all Francesca offers in her seductive account, and she wishes its effect on Dante the wayfarer. How unlike Beatrice, who straddles the physical and the transcendent and will guide Dante all the way to the sea-poem of beauty and a seeing into its immaterial core. But for now he falls out of himself again, unable to sustain quiescence in the face of carnal love and its deceptions.

As Dante returns to himself, he has descended even lower, seeing new torments wherever he moves or turns, touching the worst pain, the worst anguish. From the gluttonous (caught in the third circle of eternal sludge) to the avaricious and the prodigal (destined in interminable rage to roll great weights at each other in the fourth circle, forever cursing their opponents of miserliness or dissipation) Dante the wayfarer moves downwards with ease, even discoursing with Virgil on the nature of Fortune. Not even the fifth circle, the marsh of Styx, filled with the angry and the sullen continuously mangling each other while swallowing the filth of the swamp, deters our hero. Indeed, it marks his first step in discernment of the nature of evil. As they cross the marsh in the boat of Phlegyas, a spirit rises from the malevolent waters full of thrashing bodies and greets Dante with the entreaty 'I am one that weeps' (*Inf.* VIII, 36). Dante does not faint this time, instead he responds, 'Cursed spirit, remain weeping and in sorrow'. With this response Virgil puts his arms around Dante and kisses him, for at last he is beginning to correctly fathom the nature of sin. Rather than respond with pity, Dante begins to show righteous indignation at the manifestation of sin. He is on the correct path towards understanding the justice of God. It is a small victory, for Dante has *imitated* the wrathful bodies seething around him in his treatment of Argenti – he has acted as Argenti would have. We will have to wait for Purgatory before we see a purified improvement in Dante the wayfarer's character. He is not like Christ triumphant, entering the dark empire to save deserving souls after the Harrowing of Hell. He is a mortal, falling again and again into temptation as he slowly comes to discern the full nature and working of the dark side.

The brave travellers quickly meet the human restrictions facing those who travel into the shadowy reaches. Certain sins are so powerful that they resist correct seeing and refuse to open themselves to rational examination. Incontinence is one thing, blinding violence another. A looking into the Dark Heart of Sin threatens the wayfarer with eternal loss as the blood engulfs and leaves the explorer unable to return to the Light. It is one thing to look into the Tempest, another to be able to see the Light afterwards. And so our explorers come up to the inflamed city of Dis, with its massive iron walls, and thousands of fallen angels on the ramparts, jeering at the two travellers. Virgil has to leave Dante alone to negotiate with these fallen and dangerous spirits, abandoning him to doubt and fear in the face of concentrated sin of such ferocity. His clarity of mind shaken, Dante is deafened by the war in his head, first encouraging him to continue, then despairing of success and urging him to return, alone, if is not already too late. He cannot even hear the attempt of Virgil's reason to open intractable sin to observation, all he sees is a massive surge of evil energy slamming the gates shut in front of Virgil's face. Reason and righteous indignation are not enough against the greater sins; they close themselves off to inspection and laugh from the reddened walls at any attempt to travel through them. All that is left Dante and Virgil is faith in the promise that their journey is destined to succeed. They can only wait for a greater force to assist, but in the waiting, how long it seems and how dangerous the waiting. Even one fatal glance into the depths of pure sin can destroy the traveller, leave him turned to stone, forever stuck in the storm with no hope of returning to the light. Dante and Virgil wait, in the dark night of faith without achievement, for grace to descend. Finally a chaste force enters, walks over the marsh with dry feet, scatters all sin before him, and opens the great doors of Dis with ease. Without talking to Dante or Virgil he returns to the heavens above. He is a force beyond repression and sin, able to open all doors and remain untouched – an ability as yet beyond both Dante the wayfarer and Virgil. It is a force from the heights entering the depths without temptation, with the still point stable. And so our two travellers are finally able to enter the flaming heart of violent sin.

They penetrate into a massive graveyard, full of burning tombs with lifted lids, filled with tormented sighing of those so proud that they challenged the authority of God with their own limited insight, loving self over the Divine. Unlike Christ who stepped out of the tomb into resurrection, these heretics are destined to forever remain in the limited tombs of their own ideas, burning in their small-mindedness, sure of themselves, filled with the false happiness of thought, proudly convinced that merely by thinking they could penetrate all mystery. Suddenly a voice from one of the tombs greets Dante with a formulation as charming as that of the romantic Francesca. 'O Tuscan, who makest thy way alive through the city of fire and speakest so modestly, may it please thee to stop at this point' (*Inf.* X, 22–25). Dante the wayfarer, slightly wiser as to the temptations of Hell, draws closer to Virgil, for he certainly does not want to rest inside the walls of Dis. On Virgil's instruction he turns around to look on Farinata, who has deigned *to lift himself up* in his tomb. Farinata looks at Dante, and then almost contemptuously asks him 'Who were thy ancestors?' After Dante tells him, Farinata disdainfully boasts that he has twice scattered Dante's ancestors and party. Dante cannot resist entering into the pride filled banter and boasts that both times his ancestors returned. It is a factional dispute, based on the interests of limited parties each taking a side and refusing to give in. Quickly he gets enticed into the hell of pride, tempted by Farinata to rise in close mindedness to a feud based on party loyalties. Farinata skilfully lures Dante into his hell of self-assertion by informing Dante of his future exile from beloved Florence, encouraging his resentment towards the faction that will expel him. It leaves poor Dante 'bewildered' at his future misfortune, caught in the image of his physical expulsion due to party infighting and political intrigue. Farinata has succeeded in his temptation, just as Francesca did, except now it is the resentment of hurt pride rather than the pity of tragic romance that arrests him. This time Virgil assists Dante out of the trap by showing him that this is only the exterior journey of his future life. A far more worthwhile journey through the inner world also awaits him; a journey guided by his sweet Beatrice rather than the stiff-necked Farinata, a journey that will end in the warmth of heaven rather than the cold of exile.

With clarity of focus restored, the nature of sin fixed clearly in front of them, our two intrepid explorers continue the descent. They still do not have strength enough to defeat the guards that protect the deeper levels of sin from rational insight, and have to rely on various techniques to see their way through. One method is that of goading the guardian into a blind rage with a history of its own development and then slipping through into the recesses it is trying to protect, as Virgil does with the Minotaur. Another is to negotiate with the forces and use some of their own energy to cross the darker realm, as Virgil does with the Centaurs. Skilfully manipulating the powers of the dark side to work towards inner illumination, Virgil guides Dante into the Seventh Circle of Hell, into the stench of a boiling river of blood, torturing all those who have inflicted violence against their neighbours, and across to the other side where they come to the warped Wood of those who have committed violence against themselves.

It is a fruitless wood, mal-formed with bare thorn trees on which nest evil Harpies that tear at the branches with their claws. A strange sighing rises from the wood, and once again Dante the wayfarer stands bewildered, unable to penetrate into the meaning of such a manifestation of sin. Virgil advises him to break off a twig, and as Dante does so the thorn tree spits and hisses into strangled words through the blood-sap seeping from its wound. 'Why manglest thou me? Hast thou no spirit of pity?' (*Inf.* XIII, 33) it cries. It is Pier delle Vigne, the avaricious advisor to Emperor Fredrick the Second, who, when imprisoned and blinded for using his position to illegally acquire wealth, smashed his head against the prison wall to avoid further humiliation. Unlike Christ, who was humiliated and died to save others, Vigne committed suicide due to his pride. He loved himself so much that he could not face the consequences of his own disgrace. Unlike Christ who was crowned with thorns and suffered on a tree, Vigne *becomes* the thorn tree. He is forever caught in the action of making himself non-human by becoming non-human. Unlike Christ, *Vigne* is the barren *Vine*, Christ distorted into a perverse image. Augustine's insight holds throughout the *Commedia*, all creation is in the image of its Creator, what varies is the level of distortion. In the *Inferno* we meet with what the actual effects of sin are without the deceptive veneer it manages to keep on earth. We see

deformation precisely. These suicide trees are destined, on the Day of Judgement, to fetch their corpses, drag them back to the wood and then hang the carcass on the branches of its own tormented shade. Like Judas, who hung himself in a tree after accepting 30 silver pieces, so will these suicides spend their eternity with their wasted bodies hanging in remainder.<sup>13</sup> Dante the poet artfully suggests these reverberations, Dante the wayfarer comes upon the scene crafted by his namesake, with naivety and fear. Suddenly two torn spirits come crashing through the thicket, chased by black bitch hounds, who catch one of them and tear him to bits. These are the spirits of squanderers who, unlike Vigne, have wasted all their wealth in fruitless pursuit of indulgent pleasures and are now wasted in turn. We see the linking of opposite sins in the same space, destined to forever rip at each other in an antagonism that always searches and finds an enemy to hate. He cannot help but feel pity at the suffering shown him. He tries to patch up the broken thicket and then moves on so see what other fearfully twisted forms Justice takes in the nether world.

As they reach the end of the wood a burning plain comes into view with dilated flakes of fire falling continuously on those doomed to forever brush off fresh burning with feverish hands. These are those who have been violent against God, Nature and Art. Yet obvious among all the spirits lies one, indifferent to the fire, scornful of the punishment, contorted though he is on the burning sand. Dante asks Virgil who he is and Capaneus himself answers 'What I was living, that am I dead' (*Inf.* XIV, 48). In a perverse imitation of God's statement of himself in the burning bush – I am what I am – we have the blasphemer who dared to challenge God while he was living. Now he is fixed in eternal contempt, burning in his own rage, while both the rain above and the sands below scorch him mercilessly. As Virgil tells him, it is his own rage, blazing within, that is his punishment – the very nature of the sin containing within itself punishment enough. Capaneus is consumed by his sin, unable to be anything else, stuck forever in repeating

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Antony Cassell's sustained working, over several years, on a handful of the Canto's of the *Inferno*. His insights into the seductive depths of Farinata, Pier Della Vigna, and Ulysses in *Dante's Fearful Art of Justice* (1984) have dominated my writing of those scenes.

what he was in what he is. The most dangerous cry in the *Inferno* is 'I was', for it involves eternal repetition of the past rather than an opening to new experiences in the present. Those locked into the Inferno are caught in their own refusal to move out of past fixations, forever destined to repeat the same action that contains within it its own suffering. Francesca, Farinata, and Vigne are all caught in their own duplication of what they were, unable to break into the freedom that is a Present.

As Dante and Virgil negotiate the margins of the burning plain on a road just above its smouldering embers, they meet up with a group of shades eying them up and down from below as some men do 'when the moon is new'. One of them suddenly grabs Dante's 'skirt' with a delighted squeal 'How wonderful' (*Inf. XV, 24*). It is Brunetto Latini, the great poet and statesman whose poetry strongly influenced Dante. Our wayfarer is immediately seduced and offers to stay a while and chat. Brunetto refuses the offer as stopping his eternal wandering for even one moment means a hundred years of burning without being able to brush off the wounding flames. Instead Dante walks above Brunetto, with his head bent down to continue the conversation, unwittingly imitating the position of one about to be sodomized while Brunetto comes at his skirt (*Inf. XV, 40–42*). Brunetto offers high praise to Dante – promising that if he follows *his* star he cannot fail to reach *his* port of glory – coupled with a prophetic warning of his exile. He continues sweetly that the Florentines do not deserve Dante's genius, do not appreciate the blooming of 'his sweet fig'. They make manure of themselves, and Brunetto wishes that they might leave Dante unharmed, for he is a rare plant of beauty flourishing on their dung-heap. Dante the wayfarer is completely taken by these endearing wishes, and reminisces how Brunetto had taught him 'the way man makes *himself* eternal'. Yet it is precisely this path of self-divinization that failed as Dante attempted to climb the sun lit hill. Dante even ignores Virgil, so taken is he with Brunetto. Virgil turns, directly faces Dante, and makes a comment. Dante does not answer him, instead he continues talking to *Ser* Brunetto, walking in his bent over manner. It is Brunetto who is forced to break off the conversation and run off. Dante watches his naked figure running towards its doom and cannot help romanticizing him, turning Brunetto into a glorious athlete running

through the open fields of Verona, seeming to be 'the winner of the group, not the last one in'.<sup>14</sup> Dante the poet is not fooled by the attractions of Brunetto. He fills the meeting with images of excrement and flattery, putting his name-sake into a sodomized position that reveals, in Dante the wayfarer's own stance, the consequences of the temptation.

Finally the wayfarers reach the end of the burning plain punishing the violent and come to a massive waterfall tumbling into the depths of Hell containing those who have committed the most heinous of crimes, all involving some kind of fraud. It marks new levels of deception and danger, where nothing is quite as it seems. To reach into these new depths Virgil himself uses the art of deception. He asks Dante to give him a cord tied around his waist. It is the cord of self-confidence, carried by Dante since his first attempt to ascend the heights. Virgil throws the cord over the plunging cliff, hoping to attract some deceptive force keen to prey on such overweening pride (Musa [1995] 127). Dante the wayfarer is already contaminated by the upcoming fraudulence, and begins to assure the reader of his truthfulness, even swearing by the truth of the *Comedy* that what he saw rise up from the depths was *real* (*Inf.* XVI, 27–8). Geryon, a spectacularly imagined beast with the face of an honest man and the tail of a scorpion, swims up through the thick, wet

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the sodomite canto's (XV and XVI), Virgil plays a peculiar role. He is ignored by Dante in his conversation with Brunetto, utterly taken as he is by the sodomite. In canto XVI Virgil stops Dante and recommends he listen to three shades (warrior sodomites) approaching, who 'merit his respect' to the extent that were it not for the flames raining down he would counsel that Dante run towards them, rather than them towards him. Dante responds to their masculine attractions with equal weakness saying 'if I could have been sheltered from the fire I would have thrown myself below with them, and I think my guide would have allowed me to'. Clearly the masculine ethic, with its attendant sodomy held much attraction for Dante and Virgil the sojourners. I do not think that Dante the wayfarer is only attracted by respect for his statesmen elders, homoeroticism breathes through these cantos. Dante the poet warns the attentive reader of their dangers (Musa's translation brings this out the best so I have followed him in these cantos). Their warrior dance imitates the circle image of the Trinity, except their eyes are riveted on Dante. They end with the wish (that is a curse) that if he escapes the gloomy spaces of hell and turns to see the beauty of the stars again – 'when you will be glad to say: 'I was', see that you tell people of us'. This echoes the blatant blasphemy of Capaneus, and the danger of all Hell – the repetition compulsion that comes from pride.

air and lands on the precipice, handsome face showing, vicious sting hidden, hopeful for a new victim to swindle. But the trickster has been tricked, Dante is protected by the clear thinking Virgil and now Geryon must ignominiously serve as their vehicle of flight down into the depths of Malebolge and the stink of fraud.

It is a deceiving hell of ten descending moats, attached to each other by rocky bridges, and centred by a pit of icy darkness, rather than a castle of light. The two travellers make steady progress over the bridges, witnessing the punishments of pimps, panderers, seducers, flatterers, corrupt popes and soothsayers beneath them. They are almost duped by a crew of scheming devils,<sup>15</sup> but manage to escape and continue downwards, seeing the ruinous metamorphosis of thieves<sup>16</sup> before coming upon the magnificent Ulysses, proudly flaming in the depths of hell. So successful is Dante the poet's rendering of the deceiving Ulysses that he sits next to Francesca as the most attractive sinner in Hell, equal in his power to seduce the unwary reader into the dark way.

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<sup>15</sup> Virgil is duped by the scheming devils, and ignores Dante the wayfarer's feeling that these fiends are up to no-good. Slowly we see Dante able to make things out for himself as we enter the more Christian elements of Hell, whilst his pagan guide struggles with these devilish characters. Virgil is overconfident and high handed with the devils, possibly in overcompensation for how mild he was with the fallen angels of Dis, but in both cases it is the Christian characters of Evil that give Virgil the most trouble.

<sup>16</sup> Dante the poet claims to go beyond Lucan and Ovid in his metamorphic descriptions, priding himself in his ability to mutate their mutations even more (XXV, 91–135). Yet he is 'stealing' their work, and like the thieves mutate into each other as well as into reptilian forms, so Dante mutates the works of his Poetic Influences into other forms. The struggle against the Canon is strong in Dante, as Bloom observes in *The western canon* (1995), but Dante was aware of the sinful effects of such a struggle, of the pride and thievery involved. As the *Comedy* progresses he is purified of these tendencies, until he sees his own work as mere comedy in the face of God's glory. Bloom understands the pride filled struggle and gives it priority over the increasing humility of Dante. Yet it is humility and not pride that leads to the final vision, something I suspect that Bloom tends to ignore.

Dante the poet, like Plato before him, understood the power of the Greek Odyssey, and so he brackets it with the Hebraic journey of the great prophet-mystic Elijah towards God.<sup>17</sup> As Elisha watched his master *ascend* to heaven until he could see only a little cloud in the heights, so Dante the wayfarer looks *down* into the throat of the abyss and sees the flames of shades burning in their sin. One of the flames has its tip split in two and Virgil tells Dante that this is the flame of Ulysses and Diomed who ‘lament within one flame’. Dante is immediately tempted and bends towards their flame with desire, curious to hear them speak. Virgil entreats the shades to tell of how they *lost* themselves. The flame takes on the aspect of a tongue and begins to speak.

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<sup>17</sup> Elijah was the great protector and fighter for the One God, and often his enemies were destroyed by being burnt in God’s wrathful flame. He is taken up to heaven by a whirlwind in the famous account of 2 Kings 2. He is followed by the faithful Elisha, who refuses to leave his mentor, even though he knows God is going to take his master away. Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before being up-lifted, and Elisha requests for a *double* portion of Elijah’s spirit to be upon him. Elijah responds that this will be so only if Elisha manages to see the transport of Elijah to heaven. This Elisha manages, and as Elijah is moved to heaven in a chariot of fire lifted by a *whirlwind*, the mantle of Elijah falls down and is picked up by Elisha, who finds that it still retains its power to split the waters of the Jordan and return him to safety. The parallels to the journey of Ulysses are obvious reversals, showing the dangers of Greek hubris in comparison to Hebraic submission to God. Ulysses is in a *double* flame with Diomed, suffering in anger, unlike the healthy relationship between Elijah and Elisha and the double flame of blessing the student receives. Ulysses is in the depths, Elijah in the heights. The *whirlwind* destroys the quest of Ulysses but lifts Elijah to heaven and so on. Contained in this one image is the essence of my whole project. It telescopes the depths and the heights together, with the act of looking down and looking up, in a manner that encapsulates the Greek, Jewish, and Christian traditions in one image. See Cassell (1984) 83–95 for an extended discussion of the parallels. Auerbach, by the way, shows how Dante synthesizes the Greek and Hebraic traditions of representation in *Mimesis* (1953). He tracks the increasing ability of fiction in the west to focus on the beauty of the everyday without losing its mystery, to become Alive. I am interested in similar texts and a similar time period, except my question is how they teach the reader to travel through the depths and heights. To enter into these texts is to enter into a process that transforms the reader, it is an educational effect, and those that manage to sustain this kind of pedagogy through the depths and heights of human experience deserve close attention.

When I set sail from Circe who, for more than a year, had kept me occupied close to Gaeta..., not sweetness of a son, not reverence for an aging father, not the debt of love I owed Penelope to make her happy, could quench deep in myself the burning wish to know the world and have experience of all man's vices, of all human worth. So I set out on the deep and open sea with just one ship and with that group of men, not many, who had not deserted me... [F]inally we reached the narrow neck where Hercules put up his signal-pillars to warn men not to go beyond that point (*Inf.* XXVI, 96–102, Musa's translation).

Against all the good ties that bind a man to his family and hearth, Ulysses, after a good while spent in fornication with an enchantress, set on a course to explore all of men's vices and worth, their sins and virtues. It is a journey that eventually takes Ulysses, like Dante, to the point where no mortal had ever gone beyond. Here he convinces his understandably nervous crew of the merits of attempting a journey that would reach 'behind the Sun'.

'Brothers,' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand perils have made your way to reach the west, during this so brief vigil of the senses that is still reserved for us not to deny yourself experience of what there is beyond, behind the sun, in the world they call unpeopled. Consider what you have come from: you are Greeks! You were not born to live like mindless brutes but to follow paths of excellence and knowledge' (*Inf.* XXVI, 106–112, Musa's translation).

It is an impassioned plea, but one of great deception and danger to a learning soul wishing to journey through the depths and heights. It is a journey of pride and curiosity, not of humility – of breaking through boundaries in a brave attempt to go where no man has gone before. It is a rash courage without the informing principle of fear at the magnitude of the attempt, a concern that should result in humility and recognition of human boundaries and divine wisdom. It emphasizes experience for the worldly senses, not the development of the spiritual senses needed to negotiate such a difficult terrain.

Appealing to his crew's pride in their origins and lust for new experiences in the unexplored is not enough however. He then also appeals to their virtue, calling it a path of excellence and knowledge. It would *seem* that his crew would gain everything they ever wanted in following the Greek hero into the unknown.

With this brief exhortation I made my crew so anxious for the way that lay ahead, that then I hardly could have held them back; and with our stern turned towards the morning light, we made our oars our wings for that mad flight, gaining distance, always sailing to the left... Five times we saw the splendour of the moon grow full and five times wane again since we had entered through the narrow pass – when there appeared a mountain shape, darkened by distance, that arose to endless heights. I had never seen another mountain like it. Our celebrations turned to grief: from the new land there rose a whirling wind that beat against the forepart of the ship and whirled us round three times in churning waters; the fourth blast raised the stern up high, and sent the bow down deep, as pleased Another's will. And then the sea was closed again, above us (*Inf.* XXVI, 112–131, Musa's translation).

Unlike the journey of Elijah into the heights, the heroic attempt of the Greeks only ends in the swallowing depths, drowned in its own presumption and pride. Ulysses and his foolish crew manage only a brief and dark glimpse at the mountain leading to God before becoming lost to themselves, destroyed by the power of a whirling wind that lifts the more prepared and humble towards God. The tale of Ulysses exists as one of the great salutary examples of the danger of attempting a journey through the depths and heights without the guidance of divine wisdom. Dante the poet would hope to guide the learning soul to a better end and warns the traveller of those deceiving teachers who promise the earth and deliver only death, even as his alter-ego bends towards the heroic flame. He had also undertaken such a mad flight in search of full experience and even managed to struggle ashore on the edge of the mount of Purgatory, only to find his way blocked by fierce creatures. *Grace* was what stood between his own heroic failure and that of

Ulysses. Descending Divine Love had sent Virgil to save Dante from being driven back into the sea to drown in his own pride and over-confidence. Now, as Dante the wayfarer makes his way through the full spectrum of arrogant sin, witnessing the *contrapasso* of God in all its majestic horror, he is being prepared for a successful journey into Purgatory and Paradise, a journey that looks up with Elisha and *indeed* travels with Elijah into the Godhead.

On and on the two travellers go through the pits of fraud, past disintegrating bodies piled on top of each other in stinking swamp after stinking swamp until eventually Dante sees what looks like high towers up ahead. They are actually the fallen giants of ancient mythology who signal the beginning of the last and most savage section of Hell, a Hell in which the faculty of intellect is joined with brute force and with evil will (*Inf.* XXXI 55–56). This is a world beyond the mere incontinence found in the upper regions of hell. It is also beyond the misuse of power and the bending of the will towards iniquity and deception met within the city of Dis and the Malebolge. We now enter a terrain in which intellect joins forces with both monstrous power and malevolent will in an unholy trinity, we drop down with Dante into the bitterly *treacherous* world of Cocytus – the bottom of the universe.

It is a macabre lake of mirrored ice studded with countless shivering heads staring down at their own purple visages. These shades cannot be convinced to tell their own stories with the promise of fame above, for they are the treacherous against family, state, guests and patrons, and do not desire remembrance above. Yet given half a chance they willingly blabber forth about their companions, keen to betray their interests. Dante the wayfarer again mimics the dispositions of this realm. He kicks one of the faces, claiming to the reader that he does not really know why it happened, maybe it was fate or chance or maybe he just really wanted to (*Inf.* XXXII 75–78). He then proceeds to rip its hair out in order to force it to name itself. Dante the poet hated the treacherous, having felt their betrayal in his exile. More importantly, the treacherous were committing a crime against the very fabric of society, destroying the trust and goodwill it was predicated on. But

Dante the wayfarer himself becomes treacherous in this inhospitable place. He makes a deceptive promise to remove the icy tears from one shade if it tells its story, and then abandons him (*Inf.* XXXIII 111–157). He is affected by every sinful state he meets in Hell, entering into its way of being, feeling its corruption on the inside, whether it be lust, pride, deception or treachery. Dante the poet, who has been through the purification process on Mount Purgatory and has been lifted into a vision of the Divine, can skilfully reveal a double process – an entering into the temptations of sin and a setting up of the scenes to reveal its true consequences. The reader is continually invited into temptation, made easier by Dante the wayfarer’s imitative response, while at the same time being faced with the consequences of his or her identification in the *contrapasso* meted out. This double process should facilitate the recognition of the need for purification, not only of Dante the pilgrim, but of the reader as well. In its innermost working it aims at the education of the human soul by tempting it in the depths before purifying it on its journey to the heights. The learning soul must first learn to see the nature of sin inside itself, feel its destructive power, understand its inner working with discrimination, penetrate into its repetition compulsion, before it can begin the process of purification. Dante the poet is pedagogically working with the distorted images of the *Inferno*, revealing in masterful scene after masterful scene the full temptation they offer as well as the logical consequences they bring. Augustine had adopted the same double register in the *Confessions*, where from enlightenment he writes of his corruption and salvation, revealing to the learning soul the potentials of the various levels – but never with such imagination.

Finally, with Dante the wayfarer’s own heart chilled by the effect of witnessing so much sin, we reach the core of Darkness. Dante is like a zombie, not living, not dead, totally numbed, mimicking the souls caught in the ice, only he is moving on the black bed, they are trapped in their hate. From a distance he sees what looks like a windmill turning its huge sails. It is actually Satan’s huge wings beating a glacial wind through Hell, fanning all those who would proudly set out on their own voyage into indiscretion, freezing them into the curse of eternal repetition rather than lifting them upwards (as the breath of the

Holy Spirit could do). Our brave explorers walk over thick ice that now contains fully immersed shades, forever frozen into specific postures, obscenely imitating the liberating act of baptism (Cassell [1984] 96–104). Satan himself is a complete distortion of the Holy Trinity. Not only does he have three heads, but his icy wind duplicates the breath of the Holy Spirit in reverse. Furthermore, he is half submerged in the frozen lake, imitating Christ being baptized, except he freezes souls into their sins, whereas Christ liberates. Each of the three heads is savaging the world's greatest sinners against God and State – Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Unlike Christ, whose own body is milled into bread and consumed in the Eucharist for the release from sin, we have the windmill Satan, consuming shattered souls like straw ice. Virgil walks undaunted right up to the responseless Satan, takes the numbed Dante into his arms, and proceeds to climb *down* Satan, into the frozen crust. As they reach the mid point of Satan, Virgil suddenly reverses direction and begins to climb *up* again. Dante fears that they might be climbing back into Hell again, but strangely as Virgil sets Dante down on a rocky crevice, all he can see are Satan's massive legs. They have penetrated right down into the centre of the earth's evilness and now must climb up through the other side. With Dante and Virgil we clamber up from the depths until, at last through a small opening we see the lovely things the heavens hold. We come out to see once more the stars (*Inf.* XXXIV 137–139).

### **Purgatorio**

Like the cave dwellers of Aristotle who come out from the depths to witness the beauty of earthly creation, Dante and Virgil surface from the putrid depths into the splendour of Purgatory, to walk on the roof of hell smelling flowers. It is dawn, with the breath of morning still wet on the grass and the four stars of natural virtue shining on the horizon. Virgil gently collects some dew in his hands and Dante lifts his tear-stained, blackened face to be washed of the slough below in a simple act of baptism. Dante has safely arrived on the shore that Ulysses and his crew only glimpsed before being plunged into the depths of their own pride, the same waters that Dante himself had almost been chased back into by the beasts. Rather than being girded by the cord of self-confidence, Virgil picks some rushes from the waters and clothes Dante with Humility. The images that the

reader meets with suddenly alter their nature from twisted temptation into purifying upliftment. Dante the poet wishes to educate through images, showing how they can reveal the abasement of the Divine, the purification of the sinner, and the glory of the Divine. It is pedagogy through the imagination. Purgatory will consist of image after image selected to purify the learning soul so that it can be taught to finally see the ultimate truth shining through the image, see the Creator streaming through his creation. Conversion to Christ through baptism might rid the learning soul of the inherited weight of human sin, just as the pursuing Egyptian army was drowned by the wrath of God in the Red Sea. But this does not obliterate the *habitus* of sin inscribed into the individual being. The Jews had to wander in the desert for forty years before coming to the Promised Land, so too the individual soul has to purify itself on the mountain of purgatory before being lifted into the heavens.

From the sea comes a heavenly vessel effortlessly carrying more than a hundred souls, all singing with united voice *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*. All have converted to Christ before death and now must face the task of purifying themselves until they are pure enough to rise towards the Divine. Disembarking, they are amazed to meet with an embodied human being in Dante, and one of them throws his arms around Dante in a warm greeting, only to slip right through him. It is Casella, a friend of Dante who put his early love poems to music. Dante requests that he sing one of his poems as it used to calm his desires. Casella does this so sweetly that Virgil, Dante and all the souls gather round in delight, forgetting all else in the sound of beauty. The enchanted group is abruptly broken up by Cato – the spirit in charge of the shore – who sharply reprimands their captivation and instructs them to immediately run to the mountain and begin the purification process. There can be no resting in the exquisiteness of beauty, its charms hold no purchase in Purgatory, all is purification and sleep, purification and sleep. Dante the wayfarer still needs to learn the lesson of the limitations of the aesthetic that Dante the poet understands so well, having already travelled *beyond* beauty. Seduced by the prestige of articulating beauty in Limbo, Dante had happily accepted his inclusion among the great poets of Antiquity. Here he is reminded that a different work awaits, and that although he

might express its functioning in a poem, it operates in ways beyond the poetic. Yet the poetic comes to life when it is animated by a deeper force that gives it substance, when it recognises its most profound calling – to simply and beautifully express Truth in a unique form. This is the ultimate aim of the Comedy and the more profound the Truth, the more poetry struggles, until eventually it too must fall silent and recognise that even the most beautiful and profound articulation is but *comedy* in the face of the Divine.

Yet it was not only Dante the wayfarer and the newly arrived souls who are reprimanded, but the great Virgil as well. His footsteps towards the mountain had also slowed at the sound of beauty. As they continue their journey he is filled with self-reproach at his mistake. He might still embody the clarity of Reason guiding the undertaking, but his powers are entering unfamiliar terrain and are uncertain of the way, of the new rules of operation and the awaiting dangers. He must continually ask for guidance. It is not only the aesthetic that loses its purchase, but reason itself must slowly begin to give way to greater powers. Reason might be vulnerable to harm in the passage down, but it still has power and insight. In the ascent towards The Good, it must become humble and attentive, seeking for direction, alert to every small fault that blocks the way, ready for the final moment when it must fully give way to a greater illumination. It is a saddening moment. Before the fall of Humanity this mountain of Purgatory would not have been necessary, Eden would have been our world rather than a paradise located on top of the mount. Now both Dante and Virgil have to sweat upwards towards a place that used to be the natural inheritance of humanity.

Initially the wayfarers find themselves climbing through Ante-Purgatory, the waiting place for those who were saved from *original* sin by confession but did not undertake to purge themselves from their own *disposition* to sin. They left making their confessions to their death-beds because of laziness, being struck down in battle and betrayal, or being preoccupied with worldly duties. As nightfall approaches the weary travellers rest in the friendly companionship of the rulers who had been too busy with earthly duties to attend to their own purification. Now they must wait the length of their earthly lives before

entering the steep way upwards. They do not seek fame on earth from the travellers, asking rather for the prayers of their loved ones, for only this can speed up the limbo they find themselves in. As the darkness descends two angels come down to protect the suspended from evil temptation, and indeed a serpent slides through the verdant grass, occasionally licking itself in self-absorption, until it is chased away by the angels. The four stars of the active virtues (justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude) in the sunset sky give way to the three contemplative virtues (faith, hope and love) of Christianity that shine through the night. These are still impossible to sustain for those in Ante-Purgatory. Contemplation with a clear mind is thwarted by the temptations of the fickle imagination. Enticement might be concealed in the business of the day but come stealthily back in the quiet of night to snake through the mind. It will take all the images of Purgatory before the mind is stilled enough to silence the snake and contemplate the Divine.

Dante is exhausted, he has not slept since the journey began on Easter Friday and now as the night of Easter Sunday envelops him he falls into sleep. As the morning draws closer, Dante dreams of an eagle with golden plumage wheeling above him. Suddenly it swoops down, 'terrible as lightning', and snatches Dante upwards towards a sphere of fire, where the flames of vision scorch him into wakefulness.<sup>18</sup> He is startled to find that during the dream he actually *was* lifted upwards to the gates of Purgatory, only it was by Lucy, the saint of vision and illuminating grace, and not an eagle. The pagan Virgil could only follow in her tracks as the workings of Grace lifted Dante up towards the beginning of active penitence. In Hell Dante had fallen *out* of consciousness into deeper levels of suffering (as when he meet Francesca) with *no* awareness of the shift downwards.<sup>19</sup> In Purgatory he has a *dream* awareness of certain of the shifts upwards. Only when we get

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<sup>18</sup> The eagle symbolizes empire and the flame at the top of Purgatory symbolizes perfected man. Together they foreshadow natural man and society in harmony, the state of earthly paradise.

<sup>19</sup> It is only with Shakespeare that we enter the downward path with full consciousness in the acute studies of Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, the great King Lear and the magnificent *Sonnets*.

to Paradise will Dante finally develop a mind as still as those in *deep* sleep and still be fully aware, only then will he contemplate the Divine in deep wakefulness.

The entrance to Purgatory is protected by an angel standing in front of a gate, with three stairs leading towards it. The first is of white marble, so smooth that Dante can see his own self reflected in it. He has to 'know himself' in all his weakness before entering the steep ascent. The second stair is of a dark burned colour, cracked throughout like the contrite heart of a sinner who recognises his sin. The third is artery red, symbolizing the outpouring of a sinner's lifeblood, keen to make amends with the sacrifice of his life to God. The angel raises his sword and wounds Dante by inscribing Seven P's (*peccatum-sin*) on his forehead with its flame. These symbolize the Seven Deadly Sins that must be purged on the seven Cornices of Purgatory. In Hell Dante the wayfarer imitated many of the vices he met with, now he must go through the stages of purgation as he clambers upwards towards his beloved. Yet now the images do not distort and tempt, they admonish and uplift. The shades of Purgatory are already saved, their wills are directed towards God. They recognise the severity of their sins and work hard at purifying themselves to become worthy of reaching towards the Divine. Their own free will keeps them in Purgatory for they know that they are not yet pure, so they desire their cleansing until the moment when they can freely lift towards God.

St. Peter's Gate slams shut behind them and immediately Virgil and Dante begin to climb upwards through a narrow chimney of rock until they reach the first terrace. It has only the width of three bodies and is completely deserted, with the brink plunging into a void and the cliff ascending into the heights. In the starkness they find that the cliff of white marble has friezes of astounding vividness engraved into it. The purification of the learning soul through a schooling in images has begun. The first image Dante sees is of the angel Gabriel descending to the Virgin Mary with the Annunciation that she is destined to give birth to Divinity. It is a humbling scene – God taking on human flesh, Mary accepting God's will – but also the fundamental moment of historical transformation, of the descent of the Divine into Materiality and the conception within

Materiality of the Sublime. It is the entry of the Divine Mother. This image is followed by Old Testament and Pagan examples of Humility for they too now play a role in the upliftment of the learning soul. If the descent into Hell begins with Pride, then the ascent into Heaven begins with Humility. If Pride results in the distortion of the image of God in its attempt to bend All towards its own desires, then Humility results in a clear seeing and depiction of the Nature of Things. Only once the learning soul stops twisting proceedings towards its own gain, and learns to see things as they are without a self-important slant, can true progress begin.

Enraptured by the images Dante is oblivious to the slow approach of a crowd of penitents. Virgil points them out and even then Dante fails to notice them. He sees a slowly approaching Edifice and gradually makes out human forms bent double underneath its columns, beating their breasts in remorse at the weight of their sin. As they struggle past Dante chanting the Lord's Prayer, he bends down to speak to them, adopting their humiliated position – only now it is to purge himself of his pride, not to be symbolically sodomized or tempted. The weary spirits do not seduce or entice Dante the wayfarer, they help him on the way to his own humility. He meets with the painter Oderisi, famous in France for his innovative painting style, who now bewails how he was beguiled by his short period of fame. His style has been forgotten and replaced by those following him, and they in turn are destined to be bettered by others to come. The same truth holds for poetry, even the most famous will disappear like a breath of wind. Oderisi's speech fills Dante with holy humility and deflates his swollen pride in his own gift, and when he finally stands up to move on, his thoughts remain bent down and modest – completely unlike his meeting with the ancient poets of Limbo. Suddenly he feels lighter, less burdened by sin, the education of purgatory is taking effect. As they continue along the terrace, Virgil instructs Dante to turn his vision down onto the path beneath them. Like tombstones contain images of the dead within them, so Dante sees underneath his feet image after image warning of the effects of foolish pride, beginning with Lucifer's fall from heaven. The school of Purgatory contains in its various classrooms images to uplift and encourage, and then images to warn and caution, all the

while enacting out the necessary purification needed on that level. All is directed to one end, to purify the learning soul so that it is finally light enough to enter The Good. This is no city of Dis with its enflamed tombs and proud shades mocking the Divine with their perverse imitations. All is ordered, regular and precise. Each of the seven terraces follows the same pattern of schooling through images and the traveller is introduced to them in a way that becomes ritualistic. First there are examples of the virtue opposed to the vice, then the penitents are met in the process of being purified, and finally examples of the damaging effects of the vice itself are contemplated before the angel of that level brushes the sin away from the traveller and points the way upwards.

Engrossed in the images, Dante hardly notices how far they have walked around the terrace, until Virgil instructs him to lift his head and see a beautiful creature, robed in white, with the face of a morning star. It is the Angel of Humility who gently beats his wings against Dante's forehead and points to a cleft in the rock that again leads upwards. As they begin the climb voices begin to sing 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. Dante himself notes the obvious, 'How different these passages from those of Hell's, for here the entrance is with songs, and there with fierce lamentations' (*Purg.* XII, 111–114 Sinclair). He feels as if a heavy weight has been lifted from him, and with dawning recognition feels the wounds inscribed on his forehead to find that there are only six, and those left have almost healed. Pride is the root of all evil, and with its elimination the travails of purification are far easier to bear.

As they reach the second terrace, our wayfarers are surprised by its acute austerity. There are no images carved into the cliff face or on the road. These would serve no use at this level as the penitents have their *envious* eyes sewn shut with iron wire like wild falcons being tamed. Encouraging examples of generosity and negative warnings of the effects of envy have to be shouted down at the penitents from flying spirits circling the terrace. The envious looked on the achievement, fortune and happiness of others with a spiteful eye, unable to take pleasure in their success. Now they are blinded and placed in the position of helpless beggars, forced to look within until they learn to take pleasure in the joy of

others. Dante the wayfarer feels that he has more difficulty with pride than envy, but his over confidence is betrayed when he asks if anyone at this level is *Italian*. The question is close to that of Farinata in Hell who asked after Dante's ancestry, but here the souls do not respond in terms of comparison with an Other, or in terms of pride in their heritage as Dante did. They respond as citizens of the True City beyond all factional and national boundaries. Both envy and pride arise from comparison to others, here in Purgatory all are part of One City, causing both vices to lose their bite. Again we see that the souls in Purgatory do not tempt Dante the wayfarer, rather they guide him into seeing the subtle mistakes he makes, the cause behind it, and the correction needed, enabling him to move to the next level. It is an efficient pedagogy that uses different modes to communicate: first vision; now hearing; later smell, taste and touch, pulling all senses into the experience of purgation.

As he climbs onto the third terrace, Dante the wayfarer is swept up into an ecstatic trance, and in the stupor has visions of gentleness towards God, friends and foes. They have entered the purgation of anger, the vice that overwhelms the mind with its rancour, and Dante has been witnessing the images of correcting gentleness in the resultant daze. A foul black mist engulfs them, gloomier than any in Hell, leaving Dante totally disoriented, calmed only by the guiding shoulder of Virgil. He hears the penitent souls praying to the Lamb of God to loosen the knot of anger that holds them in foggy suspension. Dante the wayfarer is staggered by the darkness and weight of the sin he is continuously encountering and cannot help but burst out with the question of where it all comes from. Unlike the wrathful Capaneus, forever caught in shaking his fist at God, the shade who answers Dante's question guides him towards a successful resolution of the angry question by pointing towards the freedom of will within Dante and every human being. It might be true that we enter earthly existence with a specific set of factors either for or against us – family, wealth, class, dispositions etc. Yet there is something untouched in our thrown-ness, something that remains free, and it is how we use this freedom of will that determines our lives. This freedom is to be found within and it gives us access to a better nature and higher force, no matter what situation we find ourselves

within, for it is formed in the Image of God. Marco Lombardi does not shake his fist at God nor does he settle into apathetic determinism, he points to the faculty inside us all that leads towards the Divine.<sup>20</sup> As the mist begins to lighten, Lombardi stops his discourse and runs back into the darkness, for they are approaching the Angel of Meekness and he has not yet completed his penance. But Dante the wayfarer has been cleansed by the discourse and images of this terrace, and so the Angel brushes his wings against Dante's forehead, wiping away another sin and points them upwards with the beatitude 'Blessed are the meek'.

Evening is approaching and the stars are appearing as our explorers reach the fourth level. Dante finds his powers ebbing away and his feet come to a tired halt. Virgil informs him that this is the cornice of the slothful, of those who felt or understood the love of good but did not actively pursue it in their own lives. Ironically Dante and Virgil settle down and spend the early evening discoursing about the structure of Purgatory, the nature of love, and the working of free will. It is educational but dangerously soporific. Their lethargy is abruptly disrupted by shades charging round the terrace, even though it is near midnight, shouting out encouragements to each other for more zeal. Clearly it is not because of evening that Dante the wayfarer has slowed in his journey on this level. Here the toiling continues all night. He is suffering the effects of not having loved God enough, of all the time wasted on other pursuits after clearly seeing divine love streaming through the living Beatrice. So, even with all the activity and examples of this circle, Dante cannot help but close his eyes and fall into dream sleep. As the prophetic hour

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<sup>20</sup> Marco goes on to point out the mismanagement of earthly affairs that results in free will not being nurtured clearly. It stems from the corruption of church and state, rooted in the attempt to combine the two powers rather than hold them separate. Instead of holding up examples of earthly justice and divine power, both are destroyed in the attempt to mix the two, as the Catholic Church was then doing in its grabbing for earthly power, and the French State in its mockery of Divine power (See *Purg XVI* 97–145). Gilson, in *Dante and Philosophy* (1949) makes much of this point, and it points to the manner in which Dante was anticipating the great division of powers that has only fully come into being with the American Constitution.

before dawn comes a stuttering, misshapen, sallow woman appears. She only brightens and strengthens as Dante looks at her. His gaze energizes her and she begins to sing, and as she does so she becomes fatally attractive. She declares herself to be a siren offering sweet rest to travellers like Ulysses (and Dante), along with exquisite satisfaction of desire, so that whosoever falls to her bewitching tune seldom leaves. Suddenly a saintly woman appears, desperately summoning Virgil. He emerges and seizes the siren, rips her clothes off and reveals her belly. A stench rises from her, so foul it wakes Dante up, and he finds that it is already high morning. Virgil is standing over him, waking him up, urging him to continue the climb. The eagle dream had lifted Dante all the way to the heights of Purgatory and the flame awaiting those who have purified themselves completely, this dream reveals the nature of sin in upper Purgatory, just below the flame. It is an excessive love of secondary goods, manifested in covetousness, greed, and lust. These vices make ordinary objects take on a lustre and glow. The sinner projects his own fantasies onto objects and makes them far more attractive than they really are. It is not that the object is unattractive in its own right, the ugliness arises in the selfish projection of wants and desires onto the object, entrapping the soul within an incorrectly seen image.<sup>21</sup> The clear seeing reason of Virgil rips the pretence open and reveals the stink of selfish misconception it conceals, enabling Dante to again lift his eyes towards the beauty of the Creator and his creation.

Up and up our travellers go, past the avaricious face down on the ground in contemplation of their grasping at earthly things, past the gluttonous who starve in the presence of plenty, until they arrive at the last circle where the lustful do their penance. Dante the wayfarer is alarmed to find the terrace belching forth flames, curbed only by the wind blowing up the mountain edge, leaving a small pathway right on the vertiginous edge. Here one's eyes cannot stray, and Dante fearfully picks his way along the brink,

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<sup>21</sup> Thank you to Dorothy Sayer's discussion of this image in *The comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine* vol I (1949) 220 for this insight into a tricky dream. Her notes are consistently informative and precisely detailed. They make up for a torturous attempt to render the *Comedy* into Verse.

caught between swelling emptiness and raging fire on the cliff of the heart. Two throngs of shades swiftly traverse the circle inside the flame in opposite directions, stopping to exchange brief and holy kisses, purged of all lustful intent by the blaze. It is the practice of the equal kiss, of greeting all with love and then letting go, of loving without violating. As our wayfarers reach the westernmost point of the circle, they see the angel of chastity standing beyond the flame, waiting for them with the terrifying report that the only way forward is through the flame. Virgil tries to convince Dante that the fire will not harm him, but Dante knows that he has been guilty of lust, and that the purification in the flames is going to be excruciating. Only the encouragement that Beatrice awaits on the other side is strong enough to induce him to enter. 'As soon as I was in it I would have cast myself into boiling glass to cool me' (*Purg.* XXVII 49–51). All the lustful energies of Dante are purged in the burning, leaving only purified love as he finally emerges from the flame. The angel greets him with the beatitude 'blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'. Dante first saw the beauty of God shining through the living Beatrice, now he is finally ready to reacquaint himself with the beautiful goodness manifest in her.

Exhausted from the ordeal the wayfarers fall asleep on the stairs leading up to the earthly paradise. Dante wakes up refreshed and eager, with every step upwards feeling his 'feathers grow for flight'. As they reach the topmost stair Virgil stops Dante. His function as guide and teacher is now over, and rather than pretending to know about realms beyond his understanding, he gives Dante his independence. Reason, natural virtue and art have taken the learning soul as far as it could, now something higher must take over the pedagogic process. Virgil knows his limitations and willingly states them. His words read as a credo to all teachers.

Thou hast come forth from the steep and narrow ways. See the sun that shines on thy brow; see the grass, the flowers and trees which the ground here brings forth of itself alone... No longer expect word or sign from me. Free, upright and whole is thy will and it were a fault not to act on its bidding; therefore over thyself I crown and mitre thee (*Purg.* XXVII, 130–142).

'Eager now to search within' (*Purg.* XXVIII, 1), Dante enters the world as it is without pride, envy, wrath, sloth, covetousness, greed and lust; a world without a loving of our neighbours harm, without a love that does not love enough, without a love that craves secondary things. Washed clean of all sin, he sees a world as it was originally meant to be. It is beautiful. Fragrance comes from every side. Sweet air moves the fluttering branches containing birds greeting the morning to the rustling undertone of the leaves. It is our first world. Inside and out the world is pure, gone is the threatening wood and its devouring beasts, destroyed is the pride that bent beauty towards selfish satisfactions, back a world of simple splendour. Each image rests in its own beauty and is in harmony with all others. A pure human being walks through a pure world.

A brightness drenches the forest accompanied by a sweet melody running through the glowing air, and Dante, still enraptured by the first fruits of eternal bliss, is dumbfounded. A pageant of great complexity presents itself across the stream, containing in one procession the history of the Living Church up to the *Revelations* of John, shown in living image after image of astounding power. A clap of thunder sounds as a chariot passes Dante and the whole procession halts and turns towards it. To the *Song of Songs* and in a cloud of flowers a lady emerges from the chariot, dressed in colours of living flame, covered by a veil. Dante, who in the long years after Beatrice's death had forgotten 'old love's great power', now suddenly feels the force of former love anew. Even though he cannot see her face he feels the strength of her virtue streaming out of her. It is the same virtue that struck him as a young boy when he first set eyes on Beatrice. Smitten by the force of love, Dante turns to Virgil with the trust of a little child who runs to his mother when overwhelmed....only to find emptiness. Virgil is not there. The brave, wise, kind, motherly, fatherly, masterly Virgil has gone. Filled with love, bereft of love, Dante bursts into tears. As he turns back to Beatrice for comfort she angrily confronts him. How did he condescend to approach the mount, did he not know that here Men are happy? Why had it taken all of Hell, prophetic dreams and descending spirits to get him to this point? Did he have to be begged and cajoled into coming to the

place where men are naturally content? Dante's eyes drop in shame. He sees himself reflected in the water and he turns away from it, disgraced by his own sight. The angels gathered round feel compassion for Dante and solicit Beatrice to be more gentle. Their kindness only accentuates the shock of Beatrice's accusation, breaking Dante down even further. It does not stop Beatrice. She continues, speaking through the veil. How could a man of such potential, who had actually seen the Divine pouring through her in earthly life, who had managed to express its beauty so profoundly in the *Vita Nuova*, how could so blessed and gifted a man have become so wild and coarse with evil seed? She had shown him the divine beauty of her face and her young eyes, pointed him on the correct path through the Ladder of Beauty. But as soon as she changed existences, Dante had abandoned her and given himself to other young girls and vanities. At the point where he was ready to move upwards on the Ladder of Beauty towards the virtues of the spirit, he had re-immersed himself in the flesh with its superficial image of the good. Seduced by fleshly pursuits he had forgotten about her, forgotten about the beauty of the Divine she had revealed to him. Even the dreams she had sent him had not helped. Only hauling him into the depths of Hell to see the consequences of his actions had produced the requisite effect, and to achieve this she herself had to descend to the gates of the dead, weeping and pleading for assistance.

Up to this point we have had no confession from Dante, all has been metaphorical, bending down here, going through flames there. Now, faced by the first manifestation of the Divine Love he had encountered in his own life, he is asked why he did not pursue the Transcendent Beauty revealed to him, why had he abandoned The Good above all goods? He is confronted by his own life. Dante breaks. With trembling lips and shattered voice he mumbles his confession to her thunderstorm:

Present things with their false pleasures turned my steps as soon as your face was hid (*Purg.* XXXI, 34–6).

All does not become light and happy at this point. Beatrice shifts from accusation to rebuke and, from across the stream, tells him how he should have behaved.

Never did nature or art set before thee beauty so great as the fair members in which I was enclosed, and they are crumbled in the dust; and if the highest beauty thus failed thee by my death, what mortal thing should then have drawn thee into desire for it? Truly thou oughtest, at the first shaft of deceptive things, to have risen after me who was such no longer. No young girl or other vanity of such brief worth should have bent thy wings downward to await more shots (*Purg.* XXXI, 49–60).

Beatrice is still not satisfied, words are not enough, she instructs Dante to look upon what he abandoned in his childish exploits, so that he can suffer more. As Dante lifts his unsteady eyes upwards, he sees a symbolic image of Christ, of one person with two natures, human and divine. The full weight of his wasted life comes crashing down, and in great remorse Dante faints away. He has examined his own life with eyes purified by Purgatory and seen its dissipation. He has confronted his own failure to climb the Ladder of Beauty when its path was clearly laid out for him in the life and death of Beatrice. He has seen how he turned from the Song of songs to the seductive tune of the siren. Dante has looked into himself with purified eyes and seen the devastation he has wrought there, the waste he has made, and with every fibre of his being he regrets his choice until the remorse overwhelms him and he falls into unconsciousness.

Only now is there healing and the slow entry into a Love beyond Understanding. He wakes to find himself being drawn through the stream by a beautiful lady. It is the waters of Lethe where the memory and effects of sin are washed away in Baptism. Only now will Beatrice unveil her eyes and smile on Dante, only now is Dante ready to ascend with her to the stars, only now is the learning soul ready for its greatest journey – to become like God. It has taken all of Hell and Purgatory to restore Dante to the first relationship he held with the Divine in the form of Beatrice. Now he can enter this New World with her

as his guide, for it was Beatrice, and no one else, who opened the Divine to his experience.<sup>22</sup>

### Paradiso

It is high noon, the time of Christ's ascension to Heaven, Dante stands with Beatrice in the heights of earthly paradise, and she turns upwards and looks directly into the Sun. Dante feels compelled to follow her example and, although he cannot sustain the gaze, a new luminosity suddenly appears, like day added to day (*Par. I*, 59–60). He turns his eyes towards Beatrice, still dazzled by the Sun, to find himself enveloped by Light. Unable to understand what is happening, his mind struggling to make sense of the massive illumination, he finds he has been lifted by Light into the Heavens. Beatrice instructs him to drop his agitated search for the cause of it all and just rest in the beautiful 'sea of being' surrounding him. She points to how magnificently ordered it is, how different natures sail on its waters to different ports, each guided by an informing principle given by God to fulfil its own uniqueness. This sea of beauty, with its immersion of uniqueness and order into one existence, is as close as creation can reach in

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<sup>22</sup> Dante's wife, Gemma, is passed over in all this, forgotten by the 'poet-genius' on his way to transcendence. It is an ugly lesson – the woman who bore all his children offers no transcendence – wife and muse split, as Heloise so well understood. The *Comedy* is built on grounds other than the day to day intimacies of spouses. We know nothing of Dante's relationship to Gemma so it is impossible to speculate, but von Balthasar has some astute comments on the issue. 'Only Claudel's *Le Soulier de Satin* again achieves Dante's dimension in which personal love and the shaping of the universe are mutually conditioned, taking the same path through the hell of hardest renunciations and the purgatories of expiated infidelity... And yet the woman Claudel loves is not dead, so everything remains that much more passionate. Philosophy, which came to Dante's aid, is not at Claudel's disposal, and so a tragic dualism between the two images of women becomes inevitable in his work... This muse could and ought to carry out Beatrice's work, but instead the muse dashes herself on the erotic defiance of the poet' (*The Glory of the Lord*, vol III:36). This whole issue is vexed! Baudelaire experienced the same loss of a muse when she offered herself to him physically as well as spiritually. The best discussion that I know of on this topic is Gilson's profound 'Baudelaire and the Muse' in Peyre's *Baudelaire : a collection of critical essays* (1962).

its imitation of God. Yet this pure Deep is hard to navigate with the fallen apparatus of human nature, only the cleansed dare enter its glory, and Dante warns the learning soul who is not yet ready for these heights of existence, to stay behind in case he be shipwrecked by the journey like Ulysses and his crew. For those not ready the journey means bewilderment, for those lightened by Purgatory and blessed by grace, the lifting is as easy and natural as a stream falling from the mountain heights. Dante is entering a universe made impossible to reach by human sin, a universe that was our first right, a universe only restored to us by the birth and death of the Divine on earth.

As they enter the first heaven, Dante experiences the nature of non-duality. Unlike Hell and Purgatory that had surfaces to be walked on, Dante and Beatrice enter into the moon like a 'diamond that is smitten by the sun', 'as water receives a ray of light and remains unbroken' (II, 37–40). These images anticipate the greatest non-duality of all awaiting the learning soul, that of human nature joined to God. But Dante the wayfarer is still in the early stages of transcendence, and much learning and correction will have to take place before he is ready to directly see God. Dante the poet knows that there is depth in the heights, that transcendence is not a one-off, that a sustained entering of the Divine means a continuation of learning as the depths of height are explored. The difficulty of his task is immense. Tales of reaching transcendence are difficult enough, an unceasing narrative within the heights another enterprise altogether. He portrays Dante the wayfarer as still being caught up in questions of earthly speculation, even though he has been lifted into the Divine, and shows how gentle and illuminating the education of the learning soul is at this level. The first example of this is when Dante asks Beatrice about the mysterious dark shadows on the moon. Rather than immediately spout forth with the answer she asks for Dante's opinion with a smile. He responds with the speculation that the moon is made up of different densities of matter. In her reply Beatrice is careful to begin with judiciously reasoned arguments and experiments to show the nature of his error. It is not that sense and reason are destroyed in the Divine, only that they are included and transcended. She uses reason to clear Dante's mind, leaving it bare and ready for a more illuminating light, before proceeding to provide him with a design of how the whole

universe flows out from God in a vision of different orders of light, each accorded their own sphere in descending abundance, much like the Plotinian efflux. The ruling intelligence of the specific sphere mingles with the prevailing substance of that level, producing different effects of light. One such mingling occurs in the lowest heaven, hence the shadows of the Moon. She takes Dante back to the formative principle of all, providing him with an integral vision to correct his particularistic concerns and to guide him through the ascending levels of the Heavens. This is how the learning soul is taught in the Divine – with gentle humour, great love, scrupulous attention to reason and experiment, and finally a careful pointing to the founding Mystery of it all, of how everything is bathed in the outpouring Creative Love of God. All of this is done to facilitate the learning soul's further entrance into the Light of lights. Beatrice describes the pedagogical process beautifully as being stripped in mind through reason, as the surface of the snow is stripped of colour and coldness by the stroke of the sun's warm rays. This allows a greater light to illuminate, a light so living it will sparkle in the learner's sight, a Light that has cascaded down through the heavens, informing all (*Par.* II, 105–112). It is a lesson of profound truth touchingly revealed by Dante's first love and great muse.

He lifts his head to acknowledge the power of the lesson and is astonished to see vague outlines of faces in the luminous mist. Mistaking them for reflections of more solid figures behind him, he turns around to greet them, only to find nothing there, and as he wheels around again he looks straight into the glowing eyes of his beloved, twinkling with humour at his antics. She teases him gently, pointing out that he has turned away from truth to emptiness, like he usually does. We remember how he turned to Virgil when first seeing Beatrice, only to find absence and an accusing lover, now she smiles at his roundabouts. Beatrice is not merely a symbol of transcendent love, she is also that unique young woman of Florence, initially angry and now playfully chuckling at Dante's behaviour. The Divine relationship with the learning soul is not inhuman, it has all the warmth and humour of humanity included in its deeper field. Beatrice is no cold Ma'am wielding truth as a weapon, she is a beautiful, warm, happy young spirit of a woman. She

tells him that these illuminated shades of the lowest sphere of heaven have been inconstant in their vows. The spirits are eager to talk to Dante, and so he turns to the one that seems the most keen to speak.

At first he cannot recognise her, but she instructs him to search her greater beauty now for the lesser image she held on earth, and contained within her luminescence he recognises her earthly likeness. It is Piccarda, a virgin sister forced into carnal marriage by her unsympathetic brother. Dante is beginning to see with his spiritual senses – a seeing that works from the inside out, holding a clear insight into her glowing radiance within that overtakes a more material seeing of her physical aspect. Before she can tell her story Dante cannot contain his confusion at the working of the heavens. Does she not long for the higher heavens, is she still not striving to reach ever higher? How can there be levels within the divine, surely that makes some things more divine than others, and if something is less divine than something else then how can it still be Bliss if you are wishing for a higher place? Piccarda's answer is a simple No, the essence of being blessed is to remain within the Divine Will. There is no wishing for more, no longing for a higher state, rather a resting of will within God, a peace with the Order of Things. Man will err while yet he strives.<sup>23</sup> She continues her story of how she gave up the world as a girl and promised herself to God, only to be torn away from the cloister by men more used to evil than good, and 'God knows what my life was then' (*Par.* III, 108). How different to Francesca, wilfully breaking her vows in lust and seducing Dante into the same state with the suggestive lines 'That day we read no further'. Piccarda points not to the assertion of will, so prevalent in Hell, but to its resting in God's Will to the point where both Wills become One. Dante the wayfarer's spiritual senses have not yet fully developed, he still longs for the highest heaven and is not content with its lower manifestations. Piccarda guides him to the realization that now the very striving to reach the Divine, so powerful in Purgatory, must be dropped. He must now relax his will and the drive towards perfection and learn to rest quietly in God's Will. It is a strange lesson

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<sup>23</sup> Taken from Goethe's *Faust*, part 1, Prologue in Heaven.

– lose your will to Perfection to become Perfect, drop your longing for the Higher to reach its Heights, abandon your desire for luminosity because it is muting the Light – but this is the profound insight of Piccarda into the Divine – *In His Will is our peace* (*Par.* III, 85). The learning soul must discover how to correctly use the greatest gift of God to Humanity – free will. It is the same lesson Abraham learnt with the sacrifice of Isaac – becoming One with God’s Will.

Dante the wayfarer still has much to learn before he can actually follow the most difficult of instructions, he is still within the shadow of earth and cannot see the Divine clearly even though he is within its luminescence. Beatrice explains to him that all the levels of Heaven he is going to travel through are merely presentations for his sake, conforming to the needs of his physical and mental limitations. In actuality all the spirits he will meet with are in the Highest Heaven, in direct communion with God, but for Dante the wayfarer they will present themselves in images and levels that he can comprehend, until he too is ready to step beyond images and levels into the Unimaginable. At that point the *Comedy* and the education through Images will end. For now Dante presses forth with question after question burning in his mind with the new experiences, exhilarated by the Illumination streaming into him. Yet there is one question above all others. Francesca and Piccarda breaking their vows was one thing, but he had failed Beatrice in his own vows towards her. He turns to her and asks if it is possible that a man can satisfy her with other good works for vows unfulfilled (*Par.* IV, 135–40). It is a question from Dante the man, looking back with both enlightenment and deep regret at how he failed his first love, hoping desperately to somehow make amends. Beatrice knows this and her eyes fill with love so divine that Dante is almost completely lost in the flame of it. She can see in Dante the same divine light he had first seen pouring out of her as a young girl, and she gently says that if anything seduces a love quickened by Divine Light, it is nothing but a trace of this light wrongly comprehended (a lesson Augustine understood so well). After answering his questions she turns to the source of Illumination and wordlessly looks upwards. Dante’s questioning mind falls silent and suddenly they are lifted into the Second Heaven.

Mercury contains the great souls whose service to the world distracted them from fulfilling their vows. All is movement and action within light. Dante meets the great Justinian, synthesizer of Roman Law and contributor to the establishment of Justice on Earth. For Christianity to flower across the World, it needed a stable, just, and peaceful environment to flourish within. Rome provided this. The establishment of Empire was guided and protected by the Will of God so that when He sacrificed himself to pay for the sins of man, the effects of his Action could spread across the World. But Empire was more than this, it was the necessary and legitimate manner of establishing Peace on Earth, and when complemented by the Catholic Church guiding Humanity towards Peace in Heaven, a proper ordering of Justice and Faith would have been attained. This was the ideal, one that was perversely destroyed by the Church desiring political power and the State interfering in matters of the Spirit, both intruding in the realms of the other. Paradise is about the correct ordering of relationships, and these extend far beyond the dynamic between one learning soul and the Divine. It extends to all relationships, earthly, spiritual, social, cultural, economic, scientific and aesthetic. Plato understood this in the *Republic* as did Augustine in a different way with the *City of God*. Dante continually engages with the political, cultural, scientific, spiritual, historical and aesthetic dimensions of existence, holding them together in the shimmering whole that is the *Comedy*. Yet to survey these dimensions is to go beyond the ambit of this exploration, so let us return to the singular heights and depths of the learning soul, with only occasional reference to its astounding breadth, and lift up with Dante and Beatrice to the Third Heaven.

Dante only realizes he has been transported to the sphere of Venus when his fair lady becomes more radiant than before. As he comes closer and closer to a direct vision of God, so the Image that is guiding him shines more gloriously. Light is intensified by light in a non-dual mode, qualities varying within qualities without separating off into autonomous bits bent by pride and self will into separation. It is like seeing a spark within a flame, or hearing within a voice another voice when one remains fixed and the other

comes and goes (*Par.* VIII, 14–20). It is not that individuality is abolished, only that it works within a whole that supports, augments and allows the individuality to reach satisfying expression. Paradise is the celebration of the quintessence of individuality without its fixation in the repetitive anxieties of Hell. Venus contains those spirits whose love was marred by wantonness, they loved so greatly that their ardour spilled over in excess, much like those in Mercury over-committed to Earthly service. In the Heavens they have not lost their love, or their desire for action, or their gentleness, only now it is correctly placed within a deeper vision focussed on the Divine. The gentleness of Piccarda, the urge for earthly order in Justinian, the lust for life of Charles Martel, these are great human attributes that lead to transcendence and good earthly life when correctly used but contain within them the danger of imbalance. Gentleness can allow domination, the establishment of earthly justice opens itself out to the temptations of fame and power, the love of life can mutate into Bacchalian madness. All these spirits are in the Early Divine, their human attributes both lifted them into The Good, and marred its perfect vision. They are in the heavens still falling within earth's shadow, only with the fourth heaven – the Sun – do we finally lift beyond the influence of earthly qualities, only then do we begin to see the Divine in its own terms and Dante the poet will have to find new ways to image the Divine, for he is reaching the opening where God first imagined himself, where Divinity turned around in Love towards Itself, where the First Image exists eternally in perfect union with God because He is God, we enter the Sun.

Dante the poet's powers are quickly reaching their limit point. To write about this level he cannot take into consideration the artistic niceties helpful in making this intensity digestible. All he can manage is to put the food in front of us, we must feed ourselves from its table – besides which, if we have followed him this far, we are beyond mother's milk and onto meat. The experience is so overwhelming that Dante the wayfarer forgets about his beloved Beatrice in his upliftment into the Sun, his will becomes so eager to love God that Beatrice is eclipsed from memory. She is not jealous but smiles on Dante with such radiance that she scatters his mind's absorption in The Sun, making it sparkle outwards into many elements of light that whirl into the shape of a crown above them.

The song of these lights is the song of Dante's twelve wise teachers of knowledge, told by the monk of knowledge he learnt the most from – Aquinas.<sup>24</sup> Aquinas does not talk of himself, his great *Summa*, or the Dominican Order to which he belongs. He breaks into praise of Saint Francis, the lover of poverty and simplicity. On earth there might be acrimony between the two great Orders of the Catholic Church, just as the learning soul often feels torn between the path of knowledge and that of simple love and devotion. In the heavens however, knowledge speaks of love. The only words of condemnation Aquinas utters are against the decadence of his own Order on earth. As the great Ox falls dumb, a second circle of lights appears, enclosing the first, matching motion for motion in a dance of light with light until all stop in one moment with one consent, like our eyes open and close with one impulse. One of the stars speak, it is Saint Bonaventura, the great Franciscan Monk, and he does not speak of the way of poverty or his path of love to the Divine, he tells the story of Saint Dominic and his fight for truth. In the heavens Love speaks of Knowledge. The only words of condemnation he allows are for the laxness of his own Order on Earth. This is the nature of an integral vision, one that transcends the particularity of two orders in a higher synthesis that holds the contribution of both. The two great paths to the Divine – Knowledge and Love – entail each other. Correctly understood, the one speaks of the other, just as the *Symposium* and the *Republic* do.

The transcendent symbol of both for Dante is Solomon, who, when offered any gift from God chose *knowledge in service of others*, not wisdom for its own sake or blind devotion, rather an informed loving of his people that poured outwards in both action and a Love Song. Plato understood this transcendent principle in the Philosopher King returning from the light to serve those caught in shadow, Plotinus in his house filled with orphans, Augustine in his service to Africa, Bernard understood it in the Cistercian tradition he spread through Europe – love and knowledge, service and truth, the two only fully hold

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<sup>24</sup> Again Dante manages to capture in one image a picture of my whole project although I managed only nine stars, fragments of the Divine that sing one song, Dante being the seventh of my stars leading towards a seeing of the One.

as one. As we lift with Beatrice and Dante into the Fifth Heaven, it is no surprise then that we enter the realm of those who crusaded for Christ, who combined the ardour of Love with the rigours of Service. We enter the redness of the Warrior Mars with its flaming cross and fighting saints before lifting to the whiteness of Peaceful Jupiter with its Eagle of Divine Justice and fair rulers dedicated to the establishment of peace on earth.<sup>25</sup>

After the vision of Justice, the Ladder of Beauty ascends into the divine sea of beauty and a vision beyond substance, we enter the contemplation of pure Forms. This level is so powerful and difficult for mortals to see, that Beatrice does not smile, for its glory would reduce Dante, like Semele before him, to ashes. They have entered the Seventh Heaven of Saturn, and she instructs Dante to calm his mind to the point where it becomes a mirror, still and pure, serene and alert. This instruction to quiescence is supremely difficult, and Dante has travelled through all of Hell, Purgatory and most of Heaven to reach this point. Even now he barely holds on, Beatrice limiting the Glory in case it destroys him as lightning does a branch. All is silent and light, no hymns or chants to disturb the quietening mind as it readies for a greater vision. There is only an in-breath and an out-breath, a gentle rising and falling. In the still cool Dante the wayfarer's mind sees a ladder stretching into eternity, with light of infinite variety pouring down it. Glitterings of Spirits ascend the steps in contemplation, others explore specific rungs, delighting in its uniqueness, and yet others descend downwards in compassion to the lower rungs, as Plato's Philosopher Kings were meant to, after seeing the Light. It is an image of rich freedom where each spirit follows its own quintessence, bathed in the

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<sup>25</sup> In this sixth sphere of Jupiter we have a profound imaging of the relationship between one and many in the Eagle of Divine Justice who speaks with 'I and mine' but means 'we and ours'. This sadly falls outside our singular focus, but Gilson deals with this whole question admirably and lucidly in his *Dante and Philosophy*, especially from chapter 2 onwards. Suffice it to say that Dante conceives of world justice beyond national boundaries, valid for all peoples, with clearly circumscribed spheres of power between State, Church and Intellect, between Emperor, Pope and Man, where Aristotle, Aquinas (for lack of a good Pope) and Caesar all play mutually interdependent, but clearly articulated, roles.

Glory of God, ascending, descending or remaining depending on how its own uniqueness is penetrated with the Divine. Dante the wayfarer has not yet tasted this unique coalescence between the free wills of God and man, and so can only experience it in a mirror, darkly. He knows that as blessed as the vision is, it is still shrouded, and he longs for a direct vision, for a clear seeing, for the Divine to unveil. In sympathy the spirits on Dante the wayfarer's level gather upwards in a whirlwind, and Beatrice sweeps Dante up the ladder with her into the realm of the fixed stars, and within them to the constellation of Gemini. It is Dante's own birth sign. He has reached the point of his own quintessence, of what he was meant to do as *Dante*, as what the purest and most free essence of Dante would do. He has un-knotted himself completely. In his travels he has met a world of unique individuals. None had lost their originality, although many had twisted their own selves into perverse forms. Dante had almost done the same thing with himself before waking up in the dark wood of his own sin. Now, after Hell, Purgation and the Early Divine, he has reached the point where his own uniqueness can reach its fullest and purest potential, he has become Free.

Yet all of this is only preparation, for only now is Dante *as Dante* able to enter into the Divine and behold its glory without the veil, only now can the learning soul begin its final journey as a pure *individual* desiring the Kiss on the Mouth. Only with his own will unmixed and free is Dante ready for the preparation necessary for two free wills to touch, for now he is *living his soul*. To sharpen his eyes in readiness for entering the depths of the highest blessedness, Beatrice points his attention to the heights he has already reached by making him look down on earth from the elevation of the fixed stars.<sup>26</sup> How far has he

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<sup>26</sup> The nature of ancient and medieval cosmology is strange to the moderns. The best introduction into its delights that I know of is C. S. Lewis's wonderful *The discarded image* (1964). Basically it is Ptolemaic in order with earth at the centre and then the seven spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn revolving around it. Above these gyrating spheres are the fixed stars, spinning forever in set harmony. All of these spheres get their movement from the *Primum Mobile*, the first moved, which spins at infinite speed in desire to touch that beyond time and space, the Empyrean, containing the Unmoved First Mover. What moved the universe was itself totally tranquil, much like how a beautiful,

come since staring down on Ulysses. He now views the earthly with the perspective of Elijah, and recognises the foolish narrow mindedness of those mired in muddy de-lights. Suddenly he intuits the massive workings of the infinite, of its glorious unity and impossible order, and with eyes open to its humbling beauty he turns again to Beatrice.

She is like a bird that has watched over her young in the dark night, and now takes to the open branch in eager expectation for the sun. Dante follows her eyes and sees above the thousands of lights one Sun shining so brightly that he cannot endure it. He cries out at the overpowering force enveloping him, for he is seeing the Power than opened up the path between Heaven and Earth. His mind becomes too full and falls out of itself in ecstasy. This is not the same falling into unconsciousness as in Hell, it is not a dark sleep, it is the experiencing of that beyond the mind, of going beyond oneself. As Dante comes back to his mind, Beatrice smiles at him, and he is able to bear her beauty, for he has glimpsed the source of her splendour. He has managed for the briefest possible moment to see the First manifestation of the Divine in the Son. As he falls back from this momentary peak, Dante the wayfarer finds his capacities increased and he gazes with entrancement on Beatrice's increased beauty. She points him away from herself and towards the new visions awaiting him on the level he has stabilized at. The young Beatrice, who had made every other sight appear dark to Dante, now takes him beyond herself.

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serene object stirs those around it with desire for possession. All of movement thus begins in a love for God, a movement frenzy that reaches upwards to touch The Stillness of Light that began it all. So the heavens above are full of light, cascading down from the infinite Light beyond all understanding. Darkness was limited and derived from the earth's shadow cast by the sun as it moved around us, and so, as Dante moves beyond the reaches of the earth's shadow he enters Light upon Light. The difference between this Christian vision and the Neo-Platonic idea it derives from is that the Unmoved First Mover so loved the world that He descended down from the heights into actual contact with the Material, rather than remaining forever untouched in the eternal Empyrean. The Christian does not only experience the effects of the Divine working through several removes as it reverberates through the universe, they meet him directly as He chooses to Descend through his Son – they have Grace.

Dante witnesses the Form that gave birth to the Divine on earth, the Rose in which the Divine was made flesh, along with all the individuals who achieved their potential and became their essences, before they all sweep up towards the Heaven beyond the Stars, to the pure breath of God where Dante, even in this exalted state, cannot yet enter. He is still within the realms of time and space, still under the tutelage of Beatrice, still staring too fixedly at her beauty, still within the realm of the first Figures that gave birth to the Divine, not the Divine itself. Before he enters the Absolute, he will have to undergo an examination of the three virtues necessary to see God – Faith, Hope, and Love – just as he had to endure the searching questioning of Beatrice before entering Paradise. Yet what is searched for here is not a *purifying* confession, rather it is the *stability, clarity* and *depth* of the Virtues within Dante that are probed with careful vigour. Before the leap, the essence of Dante's virtues is examined with scholastic rigor. It is not a time for ecstasies and raptures, for these signify shifts in levels. Now what is scrutinized is the stability and consistency of Dante's virtue. Here the smallest mistake in reason, genuineness, and possession of the virtues can lead back downwards. First Dante's faith, then his hope, and finally his love is *appraised*, yet even as he successfully negotiates the questioning, Dante cannot help but wonder about the body of Saint John, his final examiner, for legend stated that he was physically lifted into the heavens. He stares too deeply into John's luminosity, searching for some evidence of physicality, and is blinded for his efforts. Even in the final stages, Dante's questioning mind cannot rest content, he wishes for answers to all sorts of conundrums fascinating those on earth about the Divine – even whether Saint John has a body in Heaven. In these final heights the learning soul can still make mistakes, often because of what has carried it so far already, like an eagerness to know, but mainly by its tendency to still work with material conceptions, to not work with the Language beyond language. He cannot let John be as John and attempts to grasp at him with questions. Here, at the cusp of the Full Divine, it is a dangerous curiosity and tendency. Beatrice knows how to look at this level, she contemplates John 'like a bride silent and motionless' (*Par. XXV, 112*), turning her mind to gaze. Dante the wayfarer is still a student in these heights, still has much to learn from Beatrice, and after staring too

fixedly into John for physical reasons, he turns to find that he cannot see his beloved any more.

With stability comes the use of more than one spiritual sense at a level. The blinded Dante is still held intent by the *breathing* of the luminosity, and in the calmness he is reassured that his sight will be healed. Dante accepts the wounding with equanimity, he might have been over-eager in sight, but his general disposition remains accepting and serene. It is a great achievement. He has lost sight of the very image that first revealed the Divine to him, that rescued him from Hell by leaving her own footprints there, that guided him through increasing levels of bliss with her beautiful eyes and radiant smile. Now he must answer the greatest of all questions – What is Love – without her image to guide him, blinded by his own curiosity and physical tendencies. All of Hell was about Love perverted into Pride, all of Purgatory about the correct ordering of Love distorted, now Dante must reveal within himself the correct ordering of Love. It is the supreme test of the learning soul before it is ready to enter the Heaven of heavens. After telling of all the things that have brought him from the sea of perverse love to the shore of the love that is just, Dante states *'The leaves with which the garden of the eternal Gardener is embowered I love in the measure of the good He has bestowed on them (Par. XXVI, 64–67)*. This is the key recognition of the learning soul ready to enter the final Good. Dante's love is now in order with God's love, and God does not love as a means to show the glory of God, does not create as a method to reach his own Glory. God loves the creation for what it is, not what it can do for him; as an end in itself, not as a means to an end. It is a difficult transition, for the learning soul has accustomed itself to seeing *through* the image into the glory of God shining through, not into its own uniqueness. Now, if it is to set its love in order with God's love, then every single creature jumps out in its own unique beauty given to it by God. An immanent love that loves without why releases itself, Love becomes not a desire to reach upwards through creation to the Creator, but a descending Love (Charity) for all of life as God loved, enough to sacrifice himself, to empty himself so that others could Be.

His virtues correctly aligned and stabilized in God, Dante lifts up with Beatrice into the sphere directly in contact with The Divine, the first moved by the First Mover, the Crystalline. It is the opening boundary, stirred by God's first touch of creation, spinning around with infinite speed, each of its parts desiring to be in full contact with the Divine Fullness above it. From its primary movement stems all of time, its whirling imparting movement to all the spheres below it. Everything beneath takes on movement because of it; it moves only because God fired it. Time is eternity reaching outwards, time is infinity touching creation, time is love pouring from the infinite into the limited, time is Light cascading into the Cave. On any given night the learning soul can lie with the heavens and watch Infinity spin the great wheel, feel the touch of eternity in time, and wonder why we do not have the strength to look upwards more often. But with Dante we now soar, revolving at infinite speed in the Heaven first touched by God, only one veil away from Direct Sight, having travelled through ever expanding spheres reaching higher and higher. To reach into the next level would be to step into infinity, to reach a sphere without an upper limit, a cause that has no cause, a first mover that is not moved by anything, a no boundary, a level beyond levels, a grounding without ground. Entranced by the vision Dante the wayfarer stares into the eyes of Beatrice, imparadised by her Wisdom, and is astounded to see an image of the Divine that completely reverses his experiences to this moment. He sees an infinitely small point of light blazing with fierce brightness. Around it whirls a circle of fire moving at infinite speed, followed by circle after circle encompassing the other, each moving more slowly and paling as it distanced itself from the Central Unity. Unlike the world of the senses, where the earth is central, and spheres become more divine as we move away from its materiality into the Heavens, here the Divine is the Central Point from which all the Heavens and Earth hang. As a Point it has no materiality or divisibility and from its centre all things revolve. At the point where Dante the wayfarer was ready to image the infinite immensity of God beyond the Crystalline, he is presented with the opposite image, and between the infinity of the large and the infinity of the small, Dante begins to view the impossible majesty of the Divine.<sup>27</sup> The immensity of the circumference suddenly conflates into the unity of a

central point, God becomes both, holding within himself all the infinite massiveness of existence in one still point. The infinite variety of lines radiating out from the Central Point, meet in One Indivisible Stability, the Spheres cascading outwards all circle around One Heart of Light, the Infinity of Time bursting outwards holds within a Changeless Eternity, such is the Beginning of Dante's apprehension of God.

Slowly all the stars fade out until all that is left is Beatrice, a Beatrice so beautiful that only her Creator can fully appreciate her. Dante admits himself beaten.

From the first day I saw her face in this life until this sight the pursuit in my song has not been cut off; but now must my pursuit cease from following longer after her beauty in my verse, as with every artist at his limit (*Par. XXX, 28–33*).

She knows that her task as teacher and guide is done, for they have entered the heaven of pure light, light full of truth, love and joy. Dante sees a river of light pouring between banks of spring, with living sparks rising from the torrent and settling on the flowers, until intoxicated with the odour, they plunge again into the flood. Beatrice points Dante to the water, he must drink of it to stabilize his vision, for he is only seeing a shadowy forecast of what the Empyrean is truly like. As Dante's eyelids touch the waters, everything transforms, what was length becomes round, what was time becomes eternity, what was river becomes a rose, what was image becomes real. God's eternal light shining from the limitless heights reflects off the summit of the Crystalline Sphere, and rising from this light Dante sees an eternal rose, rising in thousands of tiers, containing unique places for each individual who has been redeemed. As Beatrice leads Dante into the heart of the White Rose, she points to the places reserved for those rulers of earth still struggling for universal peace and order, before launching into a scathing attack of the

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<sup>27</sup> He has glimpsed it before. After listening to the great Aquinas, an image suddenly drops into Dante's mind of water in a vessel moving either from centre to rim or from rim to centre, depending on whether it was struck from within or without (*Par XIV, 1–6*). Now as he readies to see the Divine the image is far clearer and more precise.

current Church and its corrupt popes. The enlightened are not removed from the everyday struggle, their pure vision allows them to see corruption more critically, the fight for justice more clearly. Illumination results in an entering into the particular with clarity, vigour, and reforming zeal. The *Comedy* overflows with a radical critique of the existing order, while consistently presenting a vision of how things could really be. The importance of this for Dante the poet is plain – these words of Beatrice are the last she speaks in the poem.

After taking in the spectacle of illumination Dante turns to Beatrice – she is not there – replaced by an old man shining with kindness. It is Saint Bernard, asked by Beatrice to guide Dante into the end of his longing by example. She has returned to her place in the Divine Rose, leaving once her educational task has been fulfilled, allowing the great Bernard to conduct Dante into the final Height. Dante has moved from reason to revelation to contemplation, from Virgil to Beatrice to Bernard. The Saint prays to the Mother of God to allow Dante a vision completely beyond mortality and it is fitting that Mary dominates the final entry. It is the eternal woman who has drawn him upwards into the final height. She holds in her being the deepest truth and absolute height of human existence, for as a creature she has given birth to that which created her – the Divine conceived within the Human. She looks down on Bernard with radiant kindness before lifting her eyes to the Eternal Light, and Dante, who is finally reaching the end of all desires, at last manages to quench the ardour of his craving for the Divine (*Par.* XXXIII, 45–50). All of the *Comedy* has been driven by the ardour of Dante to see the Divine, so longed for after it had ravished him as a young boy through one glance from Beatrice. Now the ache is stilled, and in the clean calm Dante's vision becomes pure.

It is an experience beyond speech and memory, leaving only an imprint, like the passion of a dream remaining even though the content is lost to recall. Dante can only hesitantly describe how he gazed into the Divine essence and saw in its depths all the complexity of the universe joined into one simplicity of light. 'I think I saw the universal form' (*Par.* XXXIII, 91). Plato, Philo, Origen, Plotinus, Augustine, Bernard all bear witness to this

single moment, a moment of such deep stillness and truth that it captures all Being in one instant. As his mind gazes, fixed and still on the Singularity of The Good beyond Being, beyond Beauty, one image quickens to his gaze. In the profound depths of Light a trinity of circles appear, one refracted by the other, and the third seemed fire breathed equally by both. Even in the final depths of height Dante has to resort to an image to express the Godhead, and then within the circles he is drawn to another image, it is an image of the human within God.<sup>28</sup> He is astounded and wishes to work out how the image of man fits into the circle of Divinity, but his mind has not wings enough for such a flight. It is a breathless instant, for there are only a couple of lines left to the whole Poem and we have travelled so far with Dante, longing with him to understand how the Divine meets with the Human, how the learning soul becomes divine, and at the key moment he declares his mind not sufficient for the final revelation. Then it comes in a flash beyond all representation, and Dante finds his will and desire wheeling in unison with the Love that moves All. Two freedoms meet and coincide without why. The pure core of Dante intersects with The Centre and revolve in love together. The Comedy ends.<sup>29</sup>

### Closing

As Dante went to his early death carrying on his face and within his self the effects of imaginably entering Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, he left us with one of the supreme

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<sup>28</sup> Much of the *Comedy* is prophetic in nature, easily done as Dante the poet is writing many years after 1300, so many of its predictions have already occurred. But to catch in one image the whole shift in emphasis of the Renaissance to the centrality of man, to man as divine, is astoundingly prophetic. Yet it is not the end point of the journey of the learning soul. Dante struggles to articulate the final heights, and we must turn to the great experiential mystics to understand these supreme levels (like Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics).

<sup>29</sup> 'And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered.' This is Wittgenstein writing to Engelman, quoted by Monk in *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (1990) 151. He would have preferred Dante to stop earlier, I suspect, but would have found in Shakespeare the master of this kind of utterance.

examples of the art of pedagogy in the western tradition. Each canto contains within its particular focus a quintessential meditation on universal themes, mixing local with general, the immanent with the transcendent, each point opening out to the infinite. Yet at the same time each canto fits into a massive harmony that slowly opens out as the Comedy unfolds, each unique archetype building on the next until a spectacular insight into the fullness of existence holds in aesthetic harmony. It is a truly generative pedagogical instrument that transforms those who enter its world. Yes

## Chapter Ten: Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Why Shakespeare? Between Dante and Shakespeare lie over two hundred and fifty years thick with pedagogical texts of the ilk explored in this thesis. Raymond Lull (1232–1316) explored how to train the different powers of the soul – knowledge, memory and will – to reach God in the *Art of Contemplation*. English translations are rare but can be found on the net. A good place to start is [www.robotwisdom.com/ai/lull.html](http://www.robotwisdom.com/ai/lull.html) for a wide selection of Lull's work but also see Yates (1974). Suso (1295–1366) used all the effects of narrative, images, allegory, and adventures to guide the learning soul towards God, especially his *Wisdom's watch upon the hours* where he encounters and is taught by his most cruel bride- Divine Wisdom. *The Cloud of Unknowing* (anonymous) contains one of the clearest accounts of how the learning soul journeys towards God. Petrarch (1304–1374) shook scholasticism at its roots and provided the learning soul with a whole new language of love and passion to undertake its journey towards the Divine, especially in his *Canzoniere*. His celebration of the divine in the human opened the education of the learning soul to all its possibilities – physical, emotional, intellectual – within an increasingly secularised context. Jean Gerson's (1363–1429) use of Ockham's Nominalism as a pedagogic technique to reach God at the turn of the fifteenth century showed how late scholasticism could be applied to the journey of the soul. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) used the whole of the Neo-Platonic inheritance in his profound guide to the learning soul, *On Learned Ignorance*. Luther (1483–1546) broke the hegemony the Catholic church held over paths that the learning soul could follow towards God, introducing an anxiety driven faith in the overwhelming power of Grace. In his cutting away of all mediations and placing the learning soul directly in front of a jealous and holy God in a personal relationship, Luther was responsible for one of the most profound transformations in western history. Erasmus (1466–1536), the great foe of Luther, was also responsible for major changes in how the education of the learning soul was conducted, but I struggled to find in his writings the kind of narrative structures necessary for this thesis, or a focusing in on the depths and the heights (the same can be said for Calvin). Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) wrote one of the most influential guides to the learning soul in his *Spiritual Exercises* set over four 'weeks'. Montaigne (1477–1592) has the merit of producing a whole new genre within the field of texts fitting my criteria – his *Essays*. Here we find one of the most nuanced explorations of the interior of the human and the difficulties of being oneself written up to then. Shakespeare picked up on these insights and integrated them into his own vision. Then there are the writings of the great articulators of the Renaissance way to The Good, the Beautiful, and the True – Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola as well as the life and writings of Bruno (1548–1600). These offered a particularly neat correspondence with my criteria in a Renaissance mode, but Francis Yates (1964, 1979) had told the story so well that I did not want to repeat it – although the *Heroic Frenzies* of Bruno was an under-explored resource that fitted the criteria of this thesis perfectly. Furthermore, the use of mnemonics by Bruno to educate a learning soul from the depths to the heights added another modality to those of the intellect, emotion, volition and imagination. Again this has been majestically captured by Yates in *Art of Memory* (1974). Yet increasingly, as I surveyed this period, I was attracted to the secular literary

## Opening

And Shakespeare<sup>2</sup> takes the learning soul on a journey into the interior of the human with unprecedented expressiveness. Like Dante he glimpses the heights of beauty, truth and

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traditions after Dante and the trans-valuation of the journey of the learning soul they offered. It was this that I wanted to turn to after a fair number of religious journey's had been described, so rather than tell another journey of the learning soul to God, I preferred to open out to the secular transformation and deconstruction of this tradition, which Petrarch and Chaucer had so brilliantly inaugurated. With this key decision, the work of Shakespeare presented itself as the obvious choice as he sits at the heart of the secular canon, with astonishing accounts of individual travels into the heights and depths of themselves without an evident Christian scaffold. Furthermore, he worked his narratives within the spectacular terrain of the stage, using live action to bring his message home with devastating effect on the memory of all who entered. The creative celebration of life embraced by the learning soul as it reached the summit of the ladder of Beauty seems to have been a preternatural disposition for Shakespeare – he embraces the depths and heights of human existence from the beginning of his writing. This offered a peculiar reversal to the order of events set up by the other stories. Shakespeare is always already within Beauty without a preset account of how he got there or how others can follow. Yet as we enter the sea of his Beauty, heights to his depths and depths to his heights open out, and it was this that I wanted to give an account of.

<sup>2</sup> The western world's most influential writer was born in 1564 and died, aged 52, in 1616. He married Anne Hathaway when only eighteen, and by nineteen already had one daughter (Susanna), soon to be followed by twins, Judith and Hamnet (who tragically died aged eleven). The next eight years of his life are a mystery, but suddenly in 1592, we have records of him having exploded onto London's literary scene with an astonishing variety of plays. When the theatres were closed in 1592 and 1593–4 due to the Plague Shakespeare turned to writing poetry, quickly finding a patron in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley. He quickly made his own money through being the major playwright for Lord Chamberlain's Company of Players, so much so that he was able to begin investing in property, restore his family's name, and become a money-lender in his own right. Official documents of his life have been tracked down, but none provide much insight into his personal life and motivations. How much time a man could have for a personal life when producing around two major works a year from around the age of 26 to 49 is debatable, and extrapolating from his collected work is a dangerous (if tempting) past-time. He finally permanently returned to Stratford and his wife around 1610, but died after only a few years back in his home town, leaving her his 'second best bed' in his will. The rest of his substantial fortune went to the sons of his eldest daughter. His larger bequest of over a million words of astonishing brilliance was left to no one and everyone. See Honan's *Shakespeare: A life* (1998) for a good recent account.

love pouring out of a human being; only it is not a young girl he writes poems to, rather a lovely boy and a dark woman. Like Dante he sinks into the infernal regions of human lust, anger, betrayal and jealousy; only Shakespeare plays it again and again, tormenting those who follow with variation after variation of the fall. Like Dante he survives the ordeal and enters a new world beyond the storm, yet never does he travel for any length into the heights of mystical union. His soul, scarred with the battle of countless nights, barely rests on a shore, safe from the tempest. The riches of classical and medieval experience bejewel Shakespeare's work, yet unlike the synthetic vision of the Florentine holding all together in one Christian poem, Shakespeare works in an open universe where individual visions have shattered the great chain and roam freely.<sup>3</sup> Characters, discourses, philosophies, and emotions are given freedom to breathe and gather strength before colliding with each other in the massive space of his collected work.<sup>4</sup> Yet in this collision

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<sup>3</sup> A good account of the period between Dante and Shakespeare and the influences exerted by Italian literature on Shakespeare can be found in Kirkpatrick's comprehensive *English and Italian literature from Dante to Shakespeare* (1995).

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable controversy over the sequence of his works but there is a fair amount of certainty in the broad sweep of his corpus. Here are the estimated dates, sequence and abbreviations of the poems and plays referred to in this chapter:

<i>Sonnets</i> (1592–1609)	<i>S.</i>
<i>Venus and Adonis</i> (1592–3)	<i>V&amp;A.</i>
<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i> (1593–4)	<i>Luc.</i>
<i>As You Like It</i> (1599)	<i>AYLI.</i>
<i>Hamlet</i> (1600–1601)	<i>Ham.</i>
<i>The Phoenix and the Turtle</i> (1601)	<i>P&amp;T.</i>
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (1601–2)	<i>T&amp;C.</i>
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> (1602–3)	<i>AW.</i>
<i>Measure for Measure</i> (1604)	<i>MM.</i>
<i>Othello</i> (1604)	<i>Oth.</i>
<i>King Lear</i> (1605)	<i>Lear.</i>
<i>Macbeth</i> (1606)	<i>Mac.</i>
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> (1606)	<i>A&amp;C.</i>

harmony is sounded, something like the clear sound of one bird singing after a massive storm, of one flower unbowed after the downpour, and it is to this that we must work. But this journey through his writing must also attend to the unprecedented ability of Shakespeare to wrap all of human experience in the beauty of words. Whether it is the humour of Falstaff, the wisdom of Rosalind, the pride of Macbeth, the anguish of Lear, the venom of Iago, the rage of Timon, the lust of Tarquin, the transcendence of Prospero and the flower maidens, all is recorded with equal beauty. All that is human is important for Shakespeare, he dances to the rhythm of the moving world. We do not find his interests focusing on only one aspect of humanity, he shows his genius in History, Comedy, Tragedy and Romance. His clarity of insight, openness to the depths and heights of existence, ability to render all that crosses his path with equal profundity, makes him one of the greatest teachers of what it is to be human in all its complex glory. This ability is immeasurably deepened by his sustained refusal to *theorize* about what it is to be. Continually he *shows* us what it is to be and not to be, *points* to it, *manifests* it rather than explaining and stating what it is – therein lies genius.

### The Phoenix

The fall is massive in Shakespeare, mainly because it starts from the heights of pure love. Here all occurs in a ‘mutual flame’ where two meet and become one. It is the experience

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<i>Timon of Athens</i> (1607–8)	<i>Tim.</i>
<i>Coriolanus</i> (1607–8)	<i>Cor.</i>
<i>Pericles</i> (1607–8)	<i>Per.</i>
<i>Cymbeline</i> (1609)	<i>Cym.</i>
<i>The Winter's Tale</i> (1610)	<i>WT.</i>
<i>The Tempest</i> (1611)	<i>Temp.</i>

I have relied on the Arden Editions throughout. Sustained good editorship, useful introductions and notes, and judicious choices of source materials make the Ardens reader friendly (unlike the more intimidating New Oxford Editions). For the Sonnets I used Katherine Duncan-Jones' superb reworking of the Arden Edition, but found Vendler's beautifully presented and interpreted work a useful addition, especially her CD reading of the Sonnets (which she knows off by heart).

of non-duality, expressed most succinctly in his exquisite poem *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.<sup>5</sup>

Two distincts, division none;  
 Number there in love was slain...  
 So between them love did shine...  
 Either was the other's mine.  
 Property was thus appalled  
 That the self was not the same:  
 Single nature's double name  
 Neither two nor one was called.

(*P&T*. 27–40)

It is an experience that transcends reason, for reason works by dissection and understanding and can only be perplexed as it sees two become one. As Virgil had to give way to Beatrice, so reason abdicates to the higher force of love.

Reason, in itself confounded,  
 Saw division grow together,  
 To themselves yet either neither,  
 Simple were so well compounded:  
 That it cried...

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<sup>5</sup> Much of this chapter is taken up with an exploration of Shakespeare's poetry. The sonnets provide the emotional heart, the narrative poems a kind of overarching plot sequence, the *Phoenix and the Turtle* a quintessential statement of the originating issue, all combining to illuminate Shakespeare's middle and later plays. This provides the rationale for my choice of texts (which loosely follows that of Hughes). I work with those plays that combine effectively with the Sonnets and the Narrative Poems. Shakespeare's poetry is curiously understudied and valued (if anything can be called that in the massive ongoing work of Shakespearean criticism), yet it was precisely the narrative poems that brought Shakespeare his initial fame.

Love hath reason, reason none,  
If what parts can so remain.

(*P&T.* 41–48)

For Plato, Philo, Plotinus, Augustine, Bernard, and Dante this non-dual experience of Love beyond Reason was the highest level of attainment that a learning soul could reach. Shakespeare the poet feels its height, has experienced its working, described its climax, but tends to locate it within a different register – that of tragedy. This rare combination of Beauty and Truth in Love lies in cinders, it is a funeral song we are hearing, all that is left are ashes within an urn – ‘Truth and beauty buried be’ (*P&T.* 64). Left to us is a truth and beauty that may only seem and never be. The pure forms have died, leaving only a funeral urn filled with ashes for those who seek its riches. It is within this wasteland that has left ‘no posterity’ that we must work. Shakespeare’s genius unfolds in his exploration of the effect of this loss on the learning soul as it attempts to reach for pure love, beauty and truth – only to find ‘dead birds’ (*P&T.* 67). It is in tracing the fault lines of broken ideals shattering the individual quest for fulfilment, peace and stability that we hear Shakespeare’s full voice. It is a voice that is tuned into the soliloquies of inner life, that has turned inwards in the quest to know itself, and then charted the convoluted and painful journey that happens without the guarantees of a ladder of beauty or of a grace filled God, without a world held together by absolutes or guided by Saints, within a world ravaged by time, with bareness everywhere, with only fragmented conceits to pick up on.

## The Sonnets

### To his Fair Youth

Breeding in such a loss filled world is the most palpable solution to ones own demise into nothingness. It answers the need for immortality caught in seething transience and this is the first answer Shakespeare explores in his Sonnet sequence (*S.* 1–17) to the young Mr. W.H.<sup>6</sup> The poet argues the case for the young man marrying to continue his line. This

age-old strategy of procreation stutters as the poet begins to fall in love with the fair youth he is writing for, as he begins to locate truth and beauty within the 'constant stars' of the young man's eyes. The long-standing argument for marriage and childbirth as a counter to never resting time loses its conviction for the love struck poet. Left is the fatal realization that by placing truth and beauty within one fair boy, his inevitable aging is 'truth's and beauty's doom and date'. It is not only the *death* of the young man but his *decay* that will result in the loss of beauty as his 'day of youth' turns to 'sullied night'. So the poet shifts the quest for permanence from procreation towards poetic creation, from sexual reproduction to the beauty of art. It is a difficult move, as poems are mere ink on paper, inferior to the complex beauty of a child sired directly from the loins, but after some hesitation (S. 16,17) the poet triumphantly makes his endeavour clear. Against time he will make his stand and show it as inadequate. No comparison with any thing to do with impermanence will suffice for the youth, his eternal summer will not fade...when in eternal lines to time he grows (S. 18). Time may do its worst, in verse his love will ever live young (S. 19), for in it he truly writes of his true love (S. 21). It is an unsettling quest to secure the higher realms of the ladder of beauty within a mortal base.

Love so strong begins to shake the power of words to express, only silent looks can convey its force. Struck dumb with love before the young man, the poet can only write about his silence and hope the youth can learn to hear with his eyes the look of love (S. 23). Words begin to fail Vision, and Shakespeare's task is to capture the failure...in words, secularising the same tension many saints felt in their attempt to describe Rapture. At the same time as these boundaries of expression are tested, so the poet begins to find his boundaries of awareness extend into the dark hours. He embarks on a journey in his head, a 'zealous pilgrimage to thee'(S. 27), a kind of sightless sight in which the youth

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<sup>6</sup> Who WH was is controversial. It was probably either Henry Wriothesley or William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke. The Dark Lady has also provoked much speculation although it seems likely that she was Emilia Lanier nee Bassano. These speculations make for fascinating reading as all sorts of affairs and machinations can be made to come into play. To be honest I far prefer the tight textual reading of Vendler to anything these types of critics dish up, much as I enjoy them. The most speculative by far is the mostly fictional *Nothing like the sun: a story of Shakespeare's love life* (1964) by the brilliant Anthony Burgess.

hangs like a jewel in the ghastly night, making night's old face new. A restless meditation begins, in which night takes on consciousness, torturing the contemplative, debarring him from the benefit of rest, until day by night and night by day is oppressed, all filled with thoughts of the young man (*S.* 28). A crushing sense of aloneness takes root as society condemns this disgraceful kind of love. All that seemed of value to the lover loses its sheen, the poet finds that what he most enjoyed he is now least contented with. Yet as he thinks of his love, almost despising himself, his state suddenly transforms into hymns sung at heaven's gate (*S.* 29). In these states of despair and ecstasy the interior world of the poet begins to deepen and clarify. Old wounds reappear with old loves. The accretion of scars and disenchantments all mourned and forgotten in a closed up space suddenly emerge new and raw, breaking the poet out into fresh emotion. He has to 'pay' as if he had not paid before. Eyes dried by too many disappointments find themselves drowned anew in grief as the pain of lost friendships and loves resurges. Yet in this new experience of old grief, new love is able to restore the losses and end the sorrow, such is its healing power (*S.* 30).

But new love in a transient world can also betray, and the shock of such unfaithfulness after the re-emergence of a vulnerable self suddenly open and fragile to emotion again is devastating. Like a traveller being told it is a beautiful day and venturing forth without a cloak only to find base clouds overtake his way, so the new lover finds his face beaten by the storm of betrayal. Words are not enough to heal the infidelity, repentance cannot take away the loss, sorrow is weak relief when a cross of such offence has to be borne. Only tears of genuine remorse are rich enough to pay the ransom of ill deeds, for they reveal true love breaking through, and only love can heal such a wound (*S.* 34). Yet the damage has been done. In this raging world of becoming the poet begins to recognise that pure love is impossible to find without its negative underside. The question is how to cope with the recognition without losing the purity of love.

Homilies do not really help. Roses with thorns or fountains with mud are truisms that cannot assuage the feelings of hate which burn with betrayal after the initial forgiveness.

In the attempt of the poet to deal with this loathsome canker that lives in sweetest bud he begins to sense his own corruption, for in attempting to justify his lover's faults the poet is compromising himself. Love and hate wage a civil war inside the poet. He launches arguments against the young man in hate, defends his actions in love, and then hates his own self for the weak accessory he is proving to be in the 'sour robbery' (*S.* 35). Yet all of this only pauses the inevitable conclusion that undivided love has become twain. Sweet (h)ours have been stolen from love's delight, the language of we and ours has shattered into a separable spite (*S.* 36). From this separation the poet does not emerge halved, he finds himself empty, everything still invested in the other who, now individual, takes all. Love is still as powerful as ever, only it is not located in the union between two, but solely in the adoration of the one. This kind of love is even more genuine and pure, the poet painfully argues, for now his love is purely focused on the other and not on a union that partly contains the self (and therefore self love). With togetherness comes the suspicion that love is partly self-serving, with separation this doubt is removed (*S.* 39) as the poet becomes nothing to his love's all.

This whole exploration of the self in love within a world of becoming, with another self who is capricious and changeable, in a way that reveals its own fluctuating responses and changing self, is a volatile affair. As we slowly discover that it is the mistress of the poet with whom the youth has been unfaithful (*S.* 40, 41, 42), a darker triangle begins to emerge. The poet attempts to find some sort of love motive for the lustful act between the two, searching for any and all rationalizations. He knowingly deludes himself by imagining that he is the link between them, that they find his image in each other, but it is futile in staving off the necessary disillusionment, the recognition of absence, and the plunge downwards into melancholy (*S.* 45). It seems that only grief lies onward, joy left behind (*S.* 50). Eventually the poet cries out in suffering and doubt towards his young love 'What is your substance, whereof are you made?' The fair youth seems to be the source of all shadows, every blessed shape somehow imitates his beauty, he appears as the very form of beauty somehow personified. The poet cannot fathom how someone so beautiful could prove false. Still seduced by the aesthetic, he can only rank truth as a

sweet ornament to beauty's fair reign. Slowly he begins to intuit that beauty without truth is a false affair, like a canker rose's seductive blooms containing no sweet odour within. They might play wantonly when 'summer's breath their masked buds discloses', but their virtue is only in their show, there is no essence to distil. But this cannot be what his relationship was with the youth, for its death is producing the sweetest odour of poetic distillation (S. 54). Beauty and love still fight on in the poet's world against truth's betrayal, refusing their reduction, still searching for virtue somewhere in the youth, for something to love. Yet it cannot silence the voice of jealousy and the taste of (and for) abasement seeping through. The effects of time keep working their way into the attempt to hold onto beauty, love and truth in a fallen world, crushing individual beauties, lovers and truths. Finally the poet cannot hold off the recognition any longer – 'ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate: that time will come and take my love away' (S. 64). Intellectual reflection combines with pure, childlike loss. How, in this raging night, will 'beauty hold a plea whose action is no stronger than a flower'? All is subject to time's decay – 'O fearful meditation' (S. 65).

All that is left for the poet in so bereft a world is a longing for 'restful death'. With just '*desert* a beggar born and purest *faith* unhappily forsworn and gilded *honour* shamefully misplaced and maiden *virtue* rudely strumpeted and right *perfection* wrongly disgraced and *strength* by limping sway disabled and *art* made tongue-tied by authority and folly (doctor like) controlling *skill* and simple *truth* miscalled simplicity and captive *good* attending to captain ill', only death seems attractive. Yet even in this darkest moment with all values endangered, love manages to somehow hold on. To die would mean the poet leaving his love alone to the dangers of corruption (S. 66)<sup>7</sup> and it seems that the lovely youth is the only surviving example of beauty left in this debased world (S. 67, 68). Somehow love manages to survive the onslaught. But all these defences of the young man's beauty are problematic, for his outward perfection hides moral corruption, and as the poet begins to articulate this clearly he is forced to see that the higher beauty of the

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<sup>7</sup> 666 is the most evil and darkest of numbers based on the 'number of the beast' in John's *Revelations*.

mind is more precious than any outward hue. The young man's fair flower contains the rank smell of weeds (*S.* 69), his beauty is not only transient but inadequate because of its superficiality.

With the shift into the deeper beauty beyond appearance, the poet begins his own interior questioning of how to deal with transience, brilliantly explored in sonnet 73. Initially he feels distraught by the loss of his spring of youth as he languishes in his autumn years. Sweet birds used to sing in his bushy tree, now only yellow leaves hang on the 'bare, ruined choirs', shaking against the cold. His resentment at this loss slowly dampens as he manages to set aside his youthful past, and instead looks forward to his impending death as black night sealing all up in rest. Yet both ways of looking at transience – resentful reminiscence or anticipatory rest – ignore the vital present with its warm emotion, and in his third attempt within the sonnet, the poet reaches for his most profound insight:

In me thou seest the glowing of such fire  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by (*S.* 73).

Past, present and future are contained in an evanescent image, integrated and held together without regret, living on that which is dying, dying in that which is living – and *still glowing*. This depth of wisdom is worth loving more than mere physicality, is more beautiful than an eye-catching face. No wonder he hopes such beauty would make the young man's love more strong. Even more extraordinary, this inner beauty has been distilled into words, leaving the 'better part of me' to the young man (*S.* 74).

With the power of poetry established as a means to distil beauty, a new concern arises – the ability of rival poets to articulate its power (*S.* 78–86). The loss of a mistress is one thing, the loss of the claim to be the primary distiller of love and beauty towards the youth another. Moving to a deeper level of beauty does not halt the anxieties and

pretences, only amplifies their field. Nor does it mean the loved one will necessarily follow into the deepening. He could enjoy the superficial flatteries of unscrupulous poets and lovers, leaving the more profound in an abyss of despair. The intensification leads the poet into a bottomless pit of self-abasement as love takes on a masochistic quality. If the poet irredeemably loves the young man and wants whatever the youth desires, then the youth's despising of him directly results in him despising himself. In the name of love he will bear all wrong (*S.* 88 & 89). Even the hatred of the young man for such an abject figure is transformed into a form of love through the poet being prepared to adopt the same attitude of disgust to himself. He holds onto their oneness, even if it means hating himself as much as the young man does. Yet all the while a clarity is developing of how shallow the appearance of beauty is without inner virtue, slowly strengthening the poet towards a radical move away from its seductiveness. Initially he can only articulate it in homily form – 'sweetest thing turn sourest by their deeds; Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds' (*S.* 94). But underlying this painful insight is the whole Neo-Platonic force-field of love and its manner of working – pouring through the heavens while keeping itself unmoved. Movement in this hypostatic world is generated by adoring response to the self-contained beauty of the One while It remains firm and secure in itself. People like this – who have the power to hurt, and will do none, who have the power to move but are themselves as stone – they rightly inherit heaven's graces. A ladder of beauty reaching towards the heights slowly begins to unfold in the sonnets, but it cannot be sustained for long. The youth is so beautiful that even his misdeeds take on a 'lascivious grace', he makes his faults graces by the sheer charm of his youthful attraction (*S.* 95–96), collapsing the ladder downwards into his own dalliance.

But even as the sequence of sonnets progresses the youth is aging and the poet's muse begins to resist the constant abasement. Time is working its effect against physical love, the inspiration is drying up, the young man is becoming old. The poet tries to deny the attrition of the three years that have gone by in the first lines of Sonnet 104: 'To me, fair friend, you can never be old, for as you were...such seems your beauty still: but three winters cold have from the forests shook three summer's pride'. Within these extremes

'three beauteous springs' have 'to yellow autumn turned', and even within this shift 'three April perfumes' have in 'three hot Junes burned'. The time of transience keeps speeding up as Sonnet 104 progresses and this melt down cannot stop until the very minutes of the dial hand of a clock steal beauty from the youth. Even though there is no pace perceived in the loss of the young man's sweet hue, he is already fully corrupted by time. He is decaying and dying, there is nothing constant in his mortal form, just as the first line of the sonnet (you can never be old) is now corrupted by its progression and the movement of the sonnet sequence as a whole.

The range of damage does not only narrow into moments, it broadens to epochs. The Platonic triad of The Good, the Beautiful and the True as well as the Christian triad of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have both been replaced by the poet's adoration of the beauty of one individual. Beauty takes precedence over Goodness and Truth, and if any constancy is to be sought, it is in the nature of individual love, not in God or Forms (*S.* 105).<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare's experiences the opening of Being in a different register to Plato and Augustine. As critical as the sonnet is of past traditions of Being, it cannot hide the tragic nature of the shift, for constancy sought in an individual is no constancy at all, and beauty, for all its seductiveness, cannot hide its ageing. Yet the poet is bent on replacing the outdated systems with something new, even though he is achingly aware of its transience. Just as Christ was anticipated in prophecy, so has the beauty of his one love been anticipated by ancient writers. But even their most striking lines written under divine inspiration cannot capture the beauty revealed by his love. Christ is replaced with the flighty young man, and messianic prophecy replaced with the poet's verse.

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<sup>8</sup> This is borne out by all three quatrains and the couplet repeating the word 'one' twice, hinting at the dual nature of love repeated four times. Rather than a Christian Three in One, we have a Shakespearean two in four. Vendler is on form in her commentary on this exceptional sonnet, opening out how it juxtaposes the Christian emphasis on Goodness with the Platonic emphasis on Beauty, shown in the shift from *kind is my love* in the first quatrain to placing *fair* beauty above kindness in the rest of the sonnet (Fair, kind, and true is all my argument). See Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997) 445–447.

The suspect nature of the youth's replacement of Christ, given his superficial nature, is compounded by the actions of the poet. He also confesses to having been unfaithful, of having gone 'here and there' (*S.* 110), but maintains that these 'worse essays' have only made him realize that the young man is his best of loves. Compromise after compromise, combined with intent to hurt, self abasement and overweening ambition all work together in a secular mix to replace the ancient and religious with newer expressions of love. This is the difficulty of working in a time-rent world and looking upon it honestly. Even so, the strategy seems to work, especially as the poet sees himself putting eternal love in 'love's fresh case' (*S.* 108), of making his lover the Form of forms. It is even romantic with everything, beautiful or ugly, shaping itself to the youth's features, mutating into his form, becoming 'replete with you' as he holds a vision of his lover in his head (*S.* 113). But closer analysis by the poet reveals a more complex and dangerous process of corruption upon corruption. Visual deception is one thing, moral corruption another and the alchemy of love licenses vice to appear as virtue in the cause of loving. The poet, knowing this, cannot help himself, his eyes have already been seduced by beauty and willingly participate in the moral corruption of the mind as both descend into delusion for the sake of loving one individual.

This very corruption of self for the sake of love can also be used to justify falling out of love – the young man can find another lover in this world of changing state. Even the distillation of love into a 'marriage of true minds' cannot withstand the charge of time, because minds also change and can thus fall in and out of love. It is a cruel argument, twisting all the poet is attempting to hold onto as love away from his grasp. Thunder tossed, he cries out against this view.

Oh no, it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken (*S.* 116).

This initial cry from the heart in defence of love dampens as the poet recognises the increasing futility of loving a young man who wants another. He concedes that something

of love does fade, precisely the rosy lips and cheeks of his loved one, and even if an ever-fixed mark is too idealistic, at least love bears<sup>9</sup> out the ravages of time to the edge of doom. It endures as the one constant force in an ever-changing world. If the young man has not loved like this, then he has never loved. Slowly we begin to see that no matter what social disgrace, human betrayal, internal pain, personal doubt or emotional humiliation the poet has suffered, through it all his love has survived, not as an ever fixed mark, but as something that has borne the brunt and stoically endured to the edge of time. Love has entered change and continued to love within the change. It is this that the sonnets bear witness to.

We have watched the poet go through phases of new sweet love, bitter betrayal, the desolation of true sorrow, the attempt to rebuild love on new, deeper foundations and the recognition of how this leads to a greater and stronger kind of love. His voice becomes stronger, more certain of itself, it has lived through a cycle and become wiser. The continual haste of time allows those living within it to see the repetitions, to understand what is lost and what remains, until they can say with the poet – ‘No! Time, though shalt not boast that I do change... This I do vow and this shall ever be: I will be true despite thy scythe and thee’ (*S.* 123). The poet has reached a point of being able to discriminate between true and false love and can now speak with quiet authority. The love he feels inside of him is not subject to the vagaries of fortune and fashion. It does not flower with praise and wilt with discontent or work strategically for its own benefit. It stands alone in its Form, ‘hugely politic’, wise and enduring within itself, beyond politics, beyond minds, beyond bodies, and beyond a single manifestation of beauty. Love itself stands out, without its various attachments and investments, pure and constant, and ironically it has taken suffering through the rounds of time to distil its purity.

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<sup>9</sup> Vendler points out that this shift embodies the move away from the secular transcendence of Petrarchian conventions into a Pauline conception of love enduring\ bearing all things. See Vendler (1997) 488–493 for a particularly brilliant meditation that illustrates why she is one of the best readers of poetry the world has. Although she would find my narrative reading of the *Sonnets* somewhat forced for her particularist tastes, this does not remove the strong influence she has had on my interpretations.

The poet can now address his 'lovely boy' without bitterness for all the betrayals and inconstancies, without regret at his own lost youth, yet the message he leaves is deadly. As beautiful as the fair youth is, his powers will wane, he too will have to answer time. Nature, who has been so kind to bless him with such allure, who has been enamoured with him to the point of resisting time's crushing demand in order to play with him for longer, will eventually have to pay for her reluctance, and her payment will be the youth:

Yet fear her, o thou minion of her pleasure:  
 She may detain, but not still keep, her treasure!  
 Her audit, though delayed, answered must be,  
 And her quietus is to render thee (S. 126).

The poet stands in a different place to the youth, having experienced the distillation of love through the fire of suffering. Time has done its worst – marred the physical beauty of his 'lovely boy', turned his own self into a 'bare ruined choir', corrupted both with infidelities and inconstancies, abased the poet emotionally and socially, sent him into an abyss of despair that touched death, destroyed his ability to see the world clearly, degraded his senses, debased his mind – and yet through it all one thing remained constant, the force of love continued coming back, rising above the humiliation and duplicity with its simple and enduring form.

An ascent of the learning soul into the heights of the ladder of beauty with its recognition of the transcendence of love beyond procreation, beautiful bodies and minds, political systems, artistic articulations and ethical principles should lead into the Ocean of Beauty and a sustained contemplation of the Forms. But Shakespeare learns by going where he has to go, not by traditional paths. He finds himself surrounded by a *sea of corruption* and pretence, with masks of beauty hiding deeper malice, not a sea of beauty. So many pretend to be beautiful or imitate its hues. After seeing into the true nature of beauty and love in its distilled state, he cannot find its form in his modern world. Sweet beauty has

no name, no 'holy bower', but is profaned, living in disgrace (*S.* 127). It is in this state of mourning the loss of fair beauty that black takes on aesthetic resonance. The poet falls heavily in love with a woman whose eyes are so black they *seem* to mourn the loss of beauty to the point of becoming beautiful themselves. Rather than rising to the heights we plunge with the poet into the lust charged world of the Dark Mistress.<sup>10</sup>

### His Dark Mistress

It is not only melancholy at how beauty has been 'slandered with a bastard shame' that pushes the poet into his entanglement with dark beauty, but the way in which old models of beauty did not consider black to be fair. His seeing into the heights of love and beauty did not fully engage with how blackness can bear beauty's name. His love of the fair youth never deeply examined the underlying current of lust coursing beneath the visual admiration of his beauty. Even if we argue that the poet was not sexually attracted to the youth, that his love was Apollonian in character, it would still mean that the nature of lust had not been dealt with and so raises its head with the Dark Lady. Seeing into the heights without dealing with the depths is a dangerous endeavour and so we sink with the poet into the ignored captivities of lust, the black sublime, into a darker knowledge of beautiful evil.

Initially it is a heady mix of body parts and music, all lips and fingers in Dionysic fusion, the mistress freely giving of her favours to all partakers (*S.* 128), but this playful cornucopia quickly gives way to painful consequences. The poet, caught in the aftermath of lust, condemns its effects while helplessly savouring its pleasures. He tries to break it down into its components to analyse it, working backwards from the 'wastes of shame' after the act, into lust-action and then to before its consummation where it exists as pure desire. But reason cannot hold and he breaks into a stream of condemnation and cursing:

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<sup>10</sup> 'From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below...My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld' (Wolkstein and Kramer [1984] 52). Shakespeare is about to follow in Inanna's footsteps.

'lust is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust'. In this tirade he cannot but remember how seductive it was before consummation, how it was 'past reason hunted', a 'joy proposed', and then how quickly it was despised after the action – 'past reason hated', 'a swallowed bait on purpose laid to make the taker mad'. All the while, the excluded middle of the actual experience exists as 'bliss in proof', making a mockery of his attempted analysis. Reflecting on his failure, both in entering temptation and failing to analyse it, the poet recognises the power of the darkness he has entered:

All this the world well knows yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell (*S.* 129).

This is not a world of altruistic ideals (*S.* 130) or appeals to the spirit. He desires her, she desires him, and after the act there are no grounds for commitment, decency or even gentleness. The poet uses the sonnets as weapons of warning and promises of payment to secure her favours, appealing to her self interest so that he can satisfy his, even promising to lift her blackness to the heights of Platonic Form if she looks on him favourably again (*S.* 131–2). The very sonnets that have born witness to the survival of love in suffering are now prostituted to lust. But her blackness is darker than what has been hinted at so far. It is not because she is mourning the loss of beauty or the loss of the poet that she is black. She is black because she steals all that is worthwhile from him, leaving with him only 'lack'. She will not only take herself away from the poet, but also strip him of his fair youth and his own self – 'Of him, my self, and thee I am forsaken' (*S.* 133). We are entering the terrain of extreme torment, loss and disintegration. This torment is complicated by the attraction the poet feels towards the promiscuity of his mistress. The very fact that she is being 'ploughed' by several men, that she is the 'wide world's common place', excites him (*S.* 137).<sup>11</sup> Her skin is scented with sin and he might know

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<sup>11</sup> This image resonates with the call of the ancient Goddesses of fertility – 'plough my vulva' – except now she has been divided into lust and purity. See Wolkstein and Kramer (1984) 37.

what true beauty is, but it does not help as he thrusts downwards into her foul world of black milk.

A further complication arises in the strange comfort that mutual deception can bring. When the poet and the dark lady do lie together, she pretends to think him young and he pretends to think her true. The one is old, the other untrue – that is the truth – but in the dark, false moment of pleasure it does not really matter. Love becomes unspeakable when it reaches heights beyond articulation but there is another unspoken between lovers, a shadowy silence of disappointments and failures that are elided in the need for gratification (*S.* 138). It is this dim comfort that the poet is becoming addicted to as well as an erotic arousal in her whorishness. In neither is there any genuine contact, but the poet cannot help himself, he needs it to the point of threatening her with exposure and slander. She can continue being the ‘bay where all men ride’ (*S.* 137) if only she pretends to still have eyes for him as well (*S.* 140).

In comparison to how love attempted to hold onto the fair youth, lust works in unsightly ways as it clutches at the dark lady. There is no sense of love slowly emerging clearly through the suffering, only a descent into chaos, made more painful by the poet’s gift of remaining clear in the dismemberment. The poet is riven with self-conflict. He knows she has error ridden looks, is coarse, possibly even has venereal disease, but it does not matter what his senses or wits tell him, his heart is bound to her in a degrading master-slave relationship where pain has become a form of pleasure (*S.* 141). He might have experienced the bliss of love in his relationship with the fair youth, now he is caught in the lash of lust with the dark beauty. He has tasted of heaven and hell and is stretched on the rack between the two. Encounters this extreme are hard enough to endure when given a solid discursive base to understand them by (like the Christian tale of an angel and devil competing for your soul), but when his fair angel is seduced by his female evil and both abandon the poet and go off to fornicate, then the experience becomes more difficult to manage. Not only has the poet tasted the heights and depths, he suspects an intimate relationship between the two, one that leaves him forgotten in the middle, traditional

understandings shattered, all bearings destroyed (*S.* 144). Light and Darkness mate with the only transparency left being the poem itself. Shakespeare catches the sound of his own breaking.

Wild oscillations follow as his conscience wallows in evil. The poet addresses his own soul and attempts to regain contact with it. He has abandoned it within the centre of his sinful earth to be devoured by the 'rebel powers' of fleshly desires. Yet there is no positive image of salvation in the attempt at rescue. Although he encourages his soul to contemplate the transience of all things in order to stop spending so much time on his 'fading mansion', it only results in a negative image of him feeding off death and the enigmatic 'death once dead, there's no more dying then' (*S.* 146). Ancient and medieval contemplations of transience were mostly meant to direct the learning soul towards the eternal beauty and truth of Being beyond becoming. In this, the poet's most explicitly religious sonnet, all we have are negatives piled up on negatives. In reaching for some positive stability in the chaos all the poet finds is a feeding frenzy of death and the best he can do is try to 'buy terms divine' by feeding on the fact that he is going to die. It is a very different formulation to the positive distillation of love that occurs at the end of the fair youth sequence. The attempt of this sonnet to regain some height is immediately undercut by the following sonnets' crazed plunge into diseased love. Reason had attempted to use Death as a contemplative means to centre in on the soul and remove it from the seething world of demand and desire, but the poet cannot resist this fevered world, even though he hears the advice of his 'wise physician'. He enters into a world 'past care', 'frantic mad with evermore unrest' where death is desire and desire is death. In a searing moment of clarity he recognises his fault and cries out – 'I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, who art as black as hell, as dark as night' (*S.* 148).

This descent into a perjured world of lust cannot produce the transcendent heights of love, but it can lead the learning soul into a deeper self-knowledge of its own weaknesses and proclivities unseen by luminescent thoughts. Like Oedipus slowly tracking his own responsibility, the poet begins to recognise his own complicity in the blackness, of how

his own darkness drew him to his Mistress Evil. It is not an easy recognition and initially the poet casts round for excuses. 'O me! What eyes hath love put in my head?' If his social world maintains his Dark Lady to be unsightly, why does he persist in seeing her with eyes of love? Could it be that all the tears and strain of watching her has made him blind, and does she not wish him blind to hide her 'foul faults' that society sees so clearly (S. 148)? Slowly he begins to recognise the levels of abasement into which he has sunk. He has incapacitated himself to accommodate her, hating who she hates, hating himself when she hates him, abusing himself to the point where all his best *worships* her 'defect'. The appalling recognition dawns that this is precisely what she hates (and he loves). She hates his spineless, grovelling love that has led into self-mutilation, yet all he can do is despise himself more as her hate increases (S. 149). An abyss of cruelty opens. Shakespeare becomes his own prophet walking down his own darkest road. What is it that ties him to such degradation? Could it be that she has secret powers that turn her black insufficiency into strength – 'Who taught thee how to make me love thee more, the more I hear and see just cause to hate?' But slowly the recriminations and questioning come full circle back to the poet. It is not false vision or whorish powers that are forcing him into this darkness. He has betrayed and corrupted himself and enjoyed the process – 'I do betray my nobler part to my gross body's treason; my soul doth tell my body that he may triumph in love; flesh stays no farther reason, but rising at thy name doth point out thee as his triumphant prize; proud of this pride, he is contented they poor drudge to be, to stand in thy affairs, fall by thy side' (S. 151). Lust, ejaculation, post coitus; need, demand, desire, and death in a continual rise and fall – the poet embraces it, cannot help but be seduced by the dark shadows of beauty.

This prepares him for the final recognition of the depth of his corruption. Lust has not only eaten away his physical and moral strength but destroyed his artistic integrity as he drank its dark milk. He misused his gift to misuse her. Desiring her physical deep he swore deep oaths of her deep kindness, feigning her en-lighten-ment for the sake of lust. She prostituted herself physically, he followed but added moral and artistic prostitution. This is how far down lust has taken him after seeing into the heights of beauty, love and

truth. She has brought him to the point of his own blasphemy – ‘*To swear against the truth so foul a lie*’ (S. 152).

Dante travelled through the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise with Reason, Love and Illuminated Grace as his guides. Shakespeare has no guide but his own capacity to *render* his experience truthfully and it is precisely this that he has sacrificed for the sake of love and then lust. His angels and devils sleep with each other and leave him abandoned in a basement with only his own degraded gift for company, his corruption complete after witnessing the fullness and coupling of the heights and depths. Like Inanna having to remove all her clothes as she descended into the Lower World, finally standing naked in front of the Shadow, so Shakespeare finds himself exposed in this foul world. Yet even this midnight he is able to capture for us to witness, even here he is able to graph the cry, such is his greatness in dissolution. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* from the position of already being enlightened, Shakespeare writes from the position of already being ruined, yet both found love in all, no matter how corrupt. Plotinus provided us with an interior guide of the journey from the alone to the heights of the Alone, Shakespeare takes us into the dark night of a soul<sup>12</sup> wandering between the extremes with no secure ladder to climb and both ends compromised. Yet in all of this Shakespeare remains clear, a part of him registers all that is happening with insight and beauty. No matter how far down or how high Shakespeare journeys, a still point remains that sees all within the beauty of the living word, ever falling from his hand, as he learns by going where he has to go.

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<sup>12</sup> St John of the Cross’ great poems on the interior journey upwards can be read as a useful supplement to Shakespeare’s more secular journey. These poems reach higher and more concentrated levels of the non-dual than Shakespeare’s marriages of pure love, but their registers are peculiarly compatible, something I suspect having to do with their melancholic\tragic dispositions. As Shakespeare’s heroes find redemption in their relationships with pure women, so too can we explore the relationship between John of the Cross and Teresa of Avilla to glimpse at how these relationships play out on the higher levels of the non dual. A synthetic vision of how these two great artists work the heights and depths of human experience would illuminate the spectrum we work within with a delicate aesthetic glow, but that is another exploration.

In all of this, somehow, abused love continues to survive. We have lived in love through the sequence, a pungent love, granted, but *in a world that is unable to live in lovelessness*. The sonnet sequence ends with two versions of this indestructibility of love (S. 153–4). Cupid falls asleep with his ‘love kindling fire’ abandoned at his side. A chaste nymph, hoping to douse the ‘heart-inflaming brand’, quenches it in a cool well nearby – ‘So was the general of hot desire...by a virgin hand disarmed’. Although the flame is put out, a ‘lively dateless heat’ grows underground, transforming the well into a seething bath. It has miraculous powers to cure the ‘strange maladies’ of diseased men. The poet, afflicted by the wounding nature of his love for his mistress, goes to the baths in hope of a cure, but finds none. The only place he can find regeneration is in the eyes of his mistress, and so again enters into the rounds of pain she inflicts. Love might be unquenchable, but it does not provide any remedies for the afflictions of the poet at the end of the sonnet sequence. He has experienced the constancy and enduring nature of true love along with the ruin of lust coursing underneath. He has offered an honest account of its fluctuations but does not locate it within any ancient or medieval discipline of the self. The discoveries are his own, there are no preset divine hierarchies to ascend or foul pits into which to sink. The poet enters the sea of becoming naked and unarmed, bearing only his prostituted gift as his guide. Effectively it means he will have to subject himself again and again to dismemberment on the tragic tree before hearing a healing song breaking through. Only with many battle-scars inscribed on his soul will the poet find a clearing of rest secure from this tempest tossed existence and the wine dark sea of tragedy. It is a different journey of the learning soul from those told before. There is no obvious *telos* driving the pedagogy and we have to watch the sequence play itself out before being able to uncover how far we have actually travelled using Shakespeare as our guide.

### **Venus and Adonis: splitting pure love**

If we find the emotional heart of Shakespeare in the *Sonnets*, the narrative core is located in the two published poem that made him famous amongst his peers – *Venus and Adonis*

and *Lucrece*.<sup>13</sup> The two stories are simple enough. The first revolves around the consequences of rejecting love and the second anatomises lust and the rape of chastity. In *Venus and Adonis* the Love Goddess falls hopelessly in love with the beautiful young man-god, only to find him not so keen to indulge her pleasure<sup>14</sup> (as Shakespeare too was

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<sup>13</sup> It is at this point that various possible routes opened out for me in the writing of this chapter. I could have gone into a detailed exploration of the various Shakespearean characters, examining the heights and depths within them and between them (Prospero and the Flower Maidens up high, Macbeth, Iago and Edmund down below, Hamlet, Lear and Othello stretched between – with various qualifications of course). Bloom follows this course in his magnum opus *Shakespeare – the invention of the human* (1998). Or I could have mined Shakespeare's language and images, showing how flowers and music sit high, martial ritual, graves and cannon drums below and tempests rumble in-between as Wilson Knight (1932) did. Or I could have proceeded to explore the soliloquies as a secularised aestheticization of the philosophical and religious quest to 'know thyself' (Clemen [1987]). All of these routes have already received ample exploration. Yet when it comes to Shakespeare's narrative poems comparatively little has been done, even though these poems received his most careful attention all the way to printing, and were much loved by his time. Furthermore, Shakespeare's actual narratives have often been dismissed as unimportant, especially when compared to his language and characterization, a dismissal doubly compounded by many of these narratives being 'lifted' from assorted sources. Yet Shakespeare was *attracted* to these narratives, and there is a demonstrable development in the narrative structures, made all the more powerful by the language and characters that lift his 'pirated' plots to such heights. These narrative developments provide crucial insight into the working of the Shakespearean corpus – the most important one being 'pure love' finally managing to survive unreasoned attack after being raped, strangled, stabbed, and drowned – a shift that finally brings sustained transcendence into Shakespeare's work and lifts him from being the great explorer of our depths into the genius who managed to straddle the complete range of our being, its darkness and light, in all its complexity and beauty. Inevitably I am not going to be able to discuss all the deconstructive logics that run through his work that make generalizations and patterns fall apart as they are woven, but for every deconstruction there needs to be a synthetic vision. I prefer the second. A more serious accusation in my eyes is that the following chapter rubs out the unique individuality of Shakespeare's characters in the attempt to fashion a coherent narrative out of his corpus. On this I am guilty as charged.

<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare shifts one detail in the myth of Venus and Adonis and it works intense changes throughout the poem. He makes Adonis reject Venus on puritanical grounds. In the original sources (see Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, x. 614–863) both love each other. Like many of Shakespeare's Sonnets, where a whole background is assumed and the first lines pick up and respond to some instated position before it, *Venus*

rejected by his 'lovely boy'). Adonis actually prefers hunting and is embarrassed by her forwardness. Not to be deterred, desire lending her force, she attempts to seduce him by plucking him off his horse and enveloping him in her arms. It is what light and frothy farce is made of, an overly passionate woman throwing herself at a shy and inexperienced young man who is not yet ready for the indulgences of adulthood. Yet underneath this farce lies the full richness of Being<sup>15</sup> offering herself for consummation and being rejected. She devours him with kisses while he lies tangled in her net, unable to escape but not prepared to give in. She tries to convince him by warning him to make use of time and not let advantage slip, 'beauty within itself should not be wasted' (*V&A*. 130). Nor is she wrinkled or 'lacking juice' (*V&A*. 136), she is exquisitely attractive, young and ready.

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*and Adonis* presents an unspoken first stage of undivided love before Adonis turns into a puritan splitting complete love into lust and chastity. This pre-stage of *Venus and Adonis* is amply explored in Shakespeare's plays where we watch various 'pure' loves (Othello, Hamlet, Leontes, Troilus, Posthumus etc) violently split down the same fault line of double vision. By choosing the myth of Venus and Adonis for his first narrative poem, Shakespeare was picking up on one of the most deep seated and influential rites of the ancient world dealing with nature and the cycles of life. See Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1935) for a particularly well written, if subjective, analysis of the myth and its variants. It is from reading this *tour de force* that I resonated with Ted Hughes' reading of Shakespeare. I have not entered into the mythological variants in this chapter, preferring to focus on Shakespeare's work, but even a cursory reading of *The Golden Bough* will point to the astounding depths such a reading lends to Shakespeare. See also Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother* (1955) and *The Myth of the Goddess* (1991) by Baring and Cashford.

<sup>15</sup> I pick up on Ted Hughes' brilliantly original (and sometimes crazy) synthetic vision of Shakespeare in his *Opus Shakespeare and the goddess of complete being* (1993). Much of what follows falls under his powerful voice which has remained in my head once the voices of other great critics like Coleridge, Bradley, Eliot, Wilson Knight, Rossiter, Bloom and Cavell faded. Although I disagree on how Hughes has ordered Shakespeare's plays (*Antony and Cleopatra* is most likely before *Timon* and *Coriolanus*) and find the mythical speculations and repetitions dangerous and tedious, I cannot help but feel that Hughes understands and feels Shakespeare's peculiar Muse and the damage it caused him (possibly because like the Desdemonas and Ophelias, Plath also died, and also because Hughes is at least as dark as Shakespeare). Shakespeare lights up for me in the same way that it does for Hughes, so much so that I struggle to hear my own interpretation separate from his. Hopefully those familiar with Hughes will find a useful summary here, and those who are not will be encouraged to dip into his last great critical work before his own sad death.

The love she is offering is not coarse and heavy, but fire and light, so why does he resist...does he love himself too much? She warns against narcissism. 'Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse.... By law of nature thou art bound to breed, that thine may live when thou thyself art dead' (*V&A*. 166–173). This outpouring of love is too much for the immature Adonis and with a grimace he rejects this forward Love Goddess. 'No more of love! The sun doth burn my face, I must remove' (*V&A*. 185–6). In the *Divine Comedy* Beatrice stood between Dante and Pure Divine Light, Venus offers the same service, only more licentiously, for she offers to '*lie* between the sun and thee' (*V&A*. 194). But Adonis the Puritan refuses her advances, he cannot feel what it is to love, he has become cold. Her offer for him to 'stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie' (*V&A*. 234) only increases his disdain and he twists out of her grasp and dashes for his horse to escape, wishing Life was less full and demanding.

His stallion has other ideas, he scents a lusty, young mare and breaks free of his bonds to mount her, crushing the iron bit between his teeth, 'controlling what he was controlled with' (*V&A*. 270). Riderless lust, consumed with desire, takes its furious pleasure, leaving its master Adonis swollen with rage, his mind disturbed, stranded with the increasingly desperate Venus. She pleads with him to learn from his stallion and welcome 'the warm approach of sweet desire' (*V&A*. 386). He responds angrily: 'I know not love...nor will not know it, unless it be a boar, and then I chase it' (*V&A*. 409–410). Beasts that attack when wounded, that refuse to die when hunted, are precisely what Venus fears. She sinks down in despair, her arms still hanging round his neck, pulling Adonis down on top of her. But although she *is* love and *does* love, she is not loved (*V&A*. 610). Adonis will not listen to her, even though she warns with foreboding that she can see him gored, his blood on fresh flowers shed (*V&A*. 665). Her pleas for him to drop his chastity and unite with her instead are rebuffed. To end the contact he offers her a farewell kiss, and as their lips touch she is so filled with desire that she almost ravishes him. Led passively along he acquiesces to her demands, but finally breaks away and insists on the hunt. The force of her desire is too much for him and he refuses to dally any

longer, fearing his *little heart will be undone in its bedchamber* (*V&A.* 780–784). He proclaims that she is not really love but lust feeding on him—

Call it not love, for love to heaven is fled,  
 Since sweating lust on earth usurp'd his name;  
 Under whose simple semblance he hath fed  
 Upon fresh beauty, blotting it with blame (*V&A.* 793–6).

Her completeness is too much for him and so he splits her Being, taking away half her wholeness, leaving her seething in lust while her better half sterilizes itself as holy chastity.<sup>16</sup> It is a fatal split to make of the Goddess of Love, and the Puritan Adonis, convinced of his rightness, breaks from her embrace, leaving 'love upon her back deeply distress'd' (*V&A.* 814), while he disappears into the blackness to hunt the boar.

After spending the night in woe she begins to search for her loved one with the sun rise, following the yelping of the hunting dogs, until she comes across the hunted boar 'whose frothy mouth bepainted all with red, like milk and blood being mingled both together' (*V&A.* 901–2), insinuates the death of Adonis. In grief she searches for his body, until she

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<sup>16</sup> D.H. Lawrence is the great modern articulator of the effects of this split within modern literature.

There is all the difference in the world between *understanding* the extreme and awful workings of sex, or even fulfilling them, responsibly; and abnormal sex. Abnormal sex comes from the fulfilling of violent or extreme desires, *against the will*. It is not the desires which are wrong, nor the fulfilment *per se*, but the fixed will in ourselves, which asserts that these things *should not be*, that only holy love should be. — You see it is impious for us to assert so flatly what *should be*, in face of what *is*. It is our responsibility to know how to accept and live through that which *is*. It is labouring under the burden of self-repudiation and shame which makes abnormality....

Abnormality and insanity comes from the split in the self, the repudiation and the condemning of the desire, and the furtive fulfilment at the same time. This makes madness (*The letters of D.H. Lawrence* 140–1, quoted in Fenton [2001] 168–9).

Far earlier, in Sophocles' *Antigone* we have the lovely Ismene pleading with her sister — 'Why rush to extremes? It's madness, madness' (*Antigone* 80–81).

hears the sound of huntsmen far off. Hope revives and even ‘flatters her it is Adonis’ voice’ (*V&A*. 978). He cannot be dead, ‘for he being dead, with him is beauty slain, and beauty dead, black Chaos comes again’ (*V&A*. 1019–1020). Running towards the sound of the hunting horn with renewed trust she stumbles upon the body of her sweet beloved, his blood drenching the nearby grass and flowers. She cannot believe such pure beauty has been destroyed, for all the world took pleasure in his magnificence. Even the boar must have loved him and only killed him in the attempt to kiss him. In a key moment she recognises her correspondence to the boar. ‘*If I had been tooth’d like him, I must confess, with kissing him I should have kill’d him first*’ (*V&A*. 1117–1118). Hurt to the core she prophesises over his dead body: ‘Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend, it shall be waited on with jealousy. Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end...It shall suspect where is no cause of fear, it shall not fear where it should most mistrust; it shall be merciful, and too severe, and most deceiving when it seems most just’ (*V&A*. 1136–1156). With the curse on love completed, his body melts away and from the blood sodden ground springs a purple flower, chequered with white, ‘resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood which in round drops upon their whiteness stood’ (*V&A*. 1170–1171). Venus picks the flower and places it between her breasts before flying off to Paphos to mourn her loved one and ‘not be seen’ (*V&A*. 1194). So ends the most popular work of Shakespeare in his lifetime.

The narrative core can be unpacked as follows. Unconditional love pursues a perfect embodiment of creation, only to find her advances spurned by a puritan mentality that carves her up between love and lust, goodness and evil, and sees her as just manifesting the latter. He escapes what he sees as her foul clutches only to confront a deadly boar that fatally gores him. Love wanders about in search of her lost object and eventually learns that her perfect beauty has been rooted by the tusk. In sorrow she curses love to eternal suffering. At this the corpse melts away to be replaced by a flower that she picks and places near her heart before flying away.

### The Rape of Lucrece: desecrating the soul

Much of this resonates across Shakespeare's corpus, as we shall see, but it leaves unexplored the central concern of Shakespeare's other long poem – the nature and consequences of lust destroying chastity. For as Adonis splits the love goddess into pure chastity and bloody lust he inflicts the same wound on his own being. Displaced lust is well represented by his stallion's sudden and violent mounting of the mare, but what if this seething undercurrent were to meet with the virginal other it has disjoined to heaven? So we move on to *The Rape of Lucrece*. The names have changed, but the underlying forces of *Venus and Adonis* continue their work. Venus has been torn in two. Her spotless half is someone very like 'Lucrece the chaste' (*Luc.* 7). Adonis the Puritan has been killed by the boar. In his place we meet 'lust-breathed Tarquin' (*Luc.* 3), hell bent on seducing his friend's pure wife. The previous night Lucrece's husband Collatine had boasted of his 'beauteous mate' and their *pure love* to Tarquin and friends. The curse of Venus hangs over this pure love – 'O happiness enjoy'd but of a few, and if possess'd, as soon decay'd and done' (*Luc.* 22–3) – and so Tarquin makes his lustful way to the unadulterated residence of Lucrece, intent on seduction. She innocently blushes when greeting her unsuspected visitor, beauty and virtue washing over her face, both perfections striving for dominance on her skin. Lucrece may not be as complete as the overwhelming Venus; still, within her chastity there is room to play. But fatally, the lack of lust asks for its return.

After supper and conversation everyone goes off to sleep, save Tarquin, 'madly toss'd between desire and dread' (*Luc.* 171). Unlike Adonis, whose prurience rode over giving in to love, we now have the return of the repressed and its mutation into lust. Yet Tarquin still feels guilt in his actions. He knows the futility and consequences of acting on his lust. 'What win I if I gain the thing I seek? A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy. Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week, or sells eternity to get a toy' (*Luc.* 211–214)? But he cannot stop the onrush, onwards he goes, 'each unwilling portal yields him way' (*Luc.* 309) until he reaches her chamber. 'Into the chamber wickedly he stalks and gazeth on

her yet unstained bed' (*Luc.* 365–366). She lies asleep and unaware, 'her hair like golden threads play'd with her breath; o modest wantons, wanton modesty' (*Luc.* 400–401). In a thing of lust he looks on her bared beauty and with a hot charge his hand reaches for her breast. Lucrece awakes as he touches, shocked, 'like to a new-kill'd bird she trembling lies' (*Luc.* 457). He blames her for his presence: 'Thy beauty hath ensnar'd thee to this night' (*Luc.* 485). She tries to reason with him but all her pleading only flames his lust more.

He rapes her, 'cooling his hot face in the chastest tears' (*Luc.* 682).

All comes to nothing in the aftermath. Lust withdraws and dissolves into guilt but chastity has forever been destroyed, not only in Lucrece lying on her spoiled bed but in *Tarquin's own soul*. His senses have battered down the consecrated wall to his own fair princess and ravaged her, taking her immortality and impregnating it with 'living death and pain perpetual' (*Luc.* 719–728). The voice of desecrated innocence breaks out into an extended lament that gives vent to her anger, pain and grief in a curse on Tarquin (*Luc.* 747–1080). In the morning she sends messengers to call her husband and father, who are both far away, the one on army camp, the other in Rome. While waiting she is able to find solace for her grief in the representation of art – a painting of the siege of Troy by the Greeks in revenge for the rape of Helen. She finds in the painted sorrow of Hecuba a rendering of distress that expresses her own suffering, in Sinon's hidden deceit an expression of secret evil that Tarquin so lately had impaled her with. Before the rape she did not understand such suffering and lurking malevolence in the wash of her innocence, now she clearly sees what the painting is capturing, her own experience sadly deepening the range of comprehension (*Luc.* 1520–1580). But the painting can only ease her grief, not cure it, and when her husband and father return she informs them of the villainy, asks them to promise revenge, reveals the rapist to be the son of the King, then stabs herself to death. The sacrifice does not bring back innocence. Over her dead body father and son compete in their grief, each claiming her for their own, while Brutus coldly calculates the political advantage her death can bring and uses the tragic event to justify his own rise to

power (*Luc.* 1791–1855). It is a sceptical ending, leaving nothing transcendent, only male egos squabbling and Machiavellian calculation thriving over the dead body of ravished virtue. Lucrece does not transform into a flower to be carried off, warm and treasured in the bosom of Love, she lies surrounded by men wrapped in their own agendas. Yet in the combination and full working out of these two poems with the sonnets we find a journey of the learning soul that takes us on a different route to that of classical and medieval accounts, an account that reaches full splendour in the broad working through of the problem comedies, the eight tragedies and the late romance plays of Shakespeare.

To see this we have to place *The Rape of Lucrece* by Tarquin within *Venus and Adonis*. As Venus splits into sweating lust and chaste love, she becomes both ravaging boar, rooting Adonis with her tusks, and sweet Lucrece. In the vicious coupling with Adonis his puritan nature is destroyed and left is the lustful Tarquin making his way to desecrate the chaste Lucrece. After the rape all descends into Machiavellian chaos, until Tarquin is finally brought to justice. With the final death of Adonis/Tarquin the saddened Love Goddess mourns his death and the body dissolves, leaving a single flower to be picked and placed between her breasts. Effectively it is an exploration of the consequences of rejecting unconditional love and its eventual resolution. Broken down into distinct moments we have the following:

- A state of undivided love (Mythical Venus and Adonis)
- The puritanical rejection of undivided love by splitting it into chaste love and sweating lust (Adonis rejects Venus)
- Sweating lust (Venus as a boar) destroys puritan rejection (Adonis) and takes over (Adonis becomes Tarquin)
- Possessed lust (Tarquin) seeks out and rapes its opposite, chaste love (Venus as Lucrece), violently combining what has been rent asunder (undivided love)
- The demise and destruction of lust (Tarquin)
- The curse of desecrated and suffering love on lust (Lucrece curses Tarquin)
- The death of love (Lucrece) or

- The transformation of lust into a flower ensconced in love (Tarquin/Adonis becomes a flower and is placed between the breasts of Venus)

This is the process we will flesh out by following Shakespeare through his later plays, but we have to bear in mind that we are actually exploring an interior world. The key moment of lust destroying love is an outward description of the interior event of the passionate senses overcoming a pure soul (*Luc.* 719–728). It is a journey into the darkness of the corruption of an interior that has rejected its own essence and is eventually redeemed by love. This is the register that we will listen for as we track our way through the problem comedies, the tragedies and the late romances. Put simply in interior terms we have:

- Undivided unity of Being between body and soul
- A split in this fullness by making a distinction between pure soul and dark passions
- Dark passions assail pure soul
- Dark passions ravish pure soul
- The demise and destruction of the dark passions
- Desecrated soul suffers and curses the passions
- The death of the pure soul or
- The transformation of self and restoration of unity between body and soul.

### **As You Like It**

To explore the first phase we can look to *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello* and *Desdemona* for examples of unconditional love, but they are wrapped in tragedy. The best example of the first phase on its own is in *As You Like It's* forest of Arden – the happiest place to be in all of Shakespeare's worlds.<sup>17</sup> Everyone who enters is transformed by its magical powers

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<sup>17</sup> Bloom's observation in his masterful overview *Shakespeare: the invention of the human* (1998) 204.

for good, it is the 'golden world' come alive again. In it we find the forgiving Duke Senior, unperturbed by his banishment from his dominions by his evil brother Duke Fredrick. We also find the melancholic Jacques, able to see deeply into the shadows of the world, but held lightly and in good humour by all around him. Then there is the magnificent Rosalind, the complete woman in love, able to be both fair youth, loving woman and play mate to her beloved Orlando, the idealistic young man who stumbles into the forest after demanding a part of his Will. We have no rape or murder, no curse of love on lust, no agonizing descent into the infernal world of the boar. Rosalind enters the forest, dressed as a man, with a boar spear in her hand (*AYLI*. 1, 3. 114), able to fend off the charge with her exceptional wit, intelligence and understanding. She is able to forestall the collapse of idealism into nihilism by schooling Orlando in the arts of real love. In her capable being she manages to thwart the descent into chaos that becomes standard fare in the tragedies. It is the consequences of the failure of her kind of education that we will explore for the rest of this chapter, so it behoves us to examine how she stops the rush.

Orlando, in his love struck idealism, declares he will die if Rosalind will not have him. With wit and in love herself, she deflates his high-flown principles:

The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause. Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club, yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love... [M]en have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love (*AYLI*. 4, 1. 89–104).

The complete being in love, she is able to be both *in love* and *clear seeing* at the same time. When Orlando persists in his idealism she deflates his stereotypical superlatives with the prick of humour. As the fair youth Ganymede, pretending to be Rosalind, she asks how long Orlando would have her after he has possessed her. He typically responds

'For ever, and a day' (*AYLI*. 4, 1. 137), his idealism blinding him to the difficulties of everyday love, preparing him for a fall. She rips into the pretension:

Say a day, without the ever. No, no, Orlando, men are April when they woo,  
 December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky  
 changes when they are wives. I will be more jealous of thee than a Barbary cock-  
 pigeon over his hen, more clamorous than a parrot against rain, more new-fangled  
 than an ape, more giddy in my desires than a monkey. I will weep for nothing,  
 like Diana in the fountain, and I will do that when you are disposed to be merry. I  
 will laugh like a hyen, and that when thou art inclined to sleep (*AYLI*. 4, 1. 138–  
 144).

This education in true love works its charm, and Rosalind and Orlando happily marry in the mother forest, idealism gently grounding itself without needing the extremes of Puritanism to sustain its one sided view. Others who enter are equally transformed.

When Orlando's eldest brother, Oliver, rages into the forest with the intention of betraying his own kin, he is immediately smitten by love. Even the usurping Duke Ferdinand finds his charge on the Forest transformed into a religious quest and he gives up all his land to take up the converted path. It is a Forest with love letters on every tree, where all who enter leave happy except for one man – the melancholy Jacques – who after witnessing all the happiness this unity can bring declares 'I am for other than for dancing measures' (*AYLI*. 5, 4. 192). He walks off in search of the altered Duke, for 'out of these convertities there is much matter to be heard and learn'd' (*AYLI*. 5, 4. 183–184). And so, as Dante left the forest to enter the dark way, we go with Jacques-speare out of this magical world of first love and into the seething hell of its betrayal. We enter a world without the overwhelming powers of Shakespeare's most coherent character, Rosalind, and his most magical place, the Forest of Arden.

## Measure for Measure

Rosalind was able to educate Orlando out of his love struck idealism and into the realities of loving a real, flesh and blood woman. But outside the mother forest such schooling is a far more painful affair, especially within a puritan environment where strong distinctions are made between the lust of the flesh and the purity of the spirit, where the education of Rosalind has not taken effect on unquestioned ideals.<sup>18</sup> So we meet the puritanical Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and his attempt to impose some order on the lust filled Vienna with the draconian proclamation that anyone caught fornicating will be put to death. His will be an education of suffering that comes with the splitting of complete being into love and lust, spirit and body. He meets with the equally puritanical Isabella, virginal and pure, about to enter the sisterhood and wishing for even 'more strict restraint' (*MM.* 1, 4. 4). She arrives to plead for the life of her brother, caught in fornication with his wife to be, Juliet. If the overwhelming Venus had arrived to make the case she would have failed against the icy morality of Angelo, as she did against Adonis, but instead we have the virginal Isabella who moves men with her 'prone and speechless dialect' (*MM.* 1, 2. 173) of youthful innocence. It is she that takes the cause of Venus into

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<sup>18</sup> I shift from *As You Like It* to *Measure for Measure* for the sake of coherence and lack of repetition, but *All's Well that Ends Well* is just as 'good' a place to begin the exploration of Shakespeare's journey of the learning soul from innocent unity into raped desecration and finally to restoration in love. Firstly we meet Helena unconditionally in love with Bertram. He rejects her love and goes off to war (preferring the hunt to love). She follows, desperate to marry him and make him hers. Meanwhile Bertram, under the influence of the boorish Parolles, meets and falls heavily in lust with the chaste Diana and determines to rape her. At the last moment Diana and Helena swop and Bertram unwittingly 'rapes' his own true 'wife'. Parolles is then exposed and persecuted. When Bertram is confronted with the truth of the matter (Helena has both his ring on her finger and his child in her belly) they happily marry. The play begins with the plots of the two poems but does not take full advantage of them. After Bertram rejects Helena we do not witness his agonizing descent into lust, nor in Bertram 'raping' Diana do we see any of the curses on lust by desecrated love, precisely because Helena manages to swop with Diana and willingly sleeps with Bertram. Only in *Measure for Measure* does the full potential of the combination of *Venus and Adonis* with *The Rape of Lucrece* come out, so it is this that I explore in the main text.

her mouth and argues the case of love. It is as if Adonis were meeting Lucrece, the very part of Venus he had split off and sent to heaven. He falls into sweating lust, within one meeting shifting from Adonis to Tarquin, desiring to desecrate the chaste Isabella. His senses breed on her and while his Adonis part lies slain, Tarquin rises to rape and pillage. There is no Venus to transform the dead Adonis into a flower, no Rosalind to guide Angelo as he plunges down from his unexamined ideals. He experiences a descent into carnality rather than the upliftment of being placed between the breasts of love.

[I]t is I, that, lying by the violet in the sun, do as the carrion does, not as the flower, corrupt with virtuous season... O cunning enemy! That, to catch a saint, with saints dost bait thy hook... Never could the strumpet, with all her double vigour, art and nature, once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid subdues me quite (*MM.* 2, 2. 165–186).

*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* have melted into one narrative. One person shifts in being from Adonis to Tarquin, another contains within her the opposite extremes of the Chaste Lucrece and the defender of Lust. We have entered a world of punishing duality outside of the Mother Forest, and it will take tragedy before Tarquin can be transformed from Carrion into a Violet.

Tragedy is avoided in *Measure for Measure* by a simple bed trick, where Angelo unwittingly ‘rapes’ his betrothed and willing Mariana rather than the virginal Isabella, and all can be put back together again by the wise Duke Vincentio (who takes Isabella for his own wife). Angelo sees through his Puritanism, marries Mariana and Vienna is restored to just and merciful rule. Because the actual rape does not occur, we do not follow through into the next phase of suffering. However, with the Tragedies Shakespeare allows the rape of the soul to occur in all its full blooded magnitude and then explores the consequences of the murder of purity and the descent into nihilism.

To explore the desecration of the soul is a profoundly exhausting, agonizing, corrosive activity yet it is here that Shakespeare reaches his full genius. The Tragedies explore the abysmal depths that human beings can reach in the destruction of their own goodness. The pure Ophelia, the innocent Desdemona, and the loving Cordelia are either drowned, strangled or hung. If it is not the unsullied young woman who dies, then it is the just and merciful king who is poisoned or stabbed to death, as in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The tragic hero cannot survive the magnitude of the despoliation, and whether it is the intellectual Hamlet, the passionate Othello, the brave Macbeth, or the suffering Lear, all die. With these tragedies there is no bed trick to save the soul from its own violation, here we witness the full descent into the depths of Dis-grace.

### **Troilus and Cressida**

But before we enter into the catharsis of tragedy we must explore the state of nihilism that comes with the loss of principles, the condition of contemplating the world sceptically as a place where only will and appetite power our working, where all is for sale and nothing sacrosanct, where dead ideals brood over a wasteland (*T&C*. 1, 3. 120–125). We must enter into the badlands of *Troilus and Cressida*, a place in which the downward spiral does not hold within it a cathartic upliftment, we must enter into a place sick unto death with the human condition, a place where all that is bequeathed is venereal disease (*T&C*. 5, 11. 56).

The women we have met on our travels through Shakespeare's plays have so far either been of the complete Rosalind or the chaste Isabella kind. Suspicion of sexual betrayal and the split of complete being into lust and love have not found any physical grounds in the unfaithfulness of the female character. With Cressida we meet a heroine who quickly substitutes beds after declaring undying love to Troilus.<sup>19</sup> Her actions are no better than

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<sup>19</sup> We begin to see a range of love relationships open out in the plays that follow the tumultuous depths and heights of the sonnets. This is well tracked by Allan Bloom's brilliant *Shakespeare on love and friendship*

Helen who happily enjoys Paris' favours when abducted from her husband Menelaus. The ideal proves false, turning Menelaus into a 'puling cuckold' who 'would drink up the lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece', and Paris into a 'lecher' who 'out of whorish loins' is pleased to breed out his inheritors (*T&C*. 4, 1. 62–66). Nor do the ancient warrior heroes fare much better. Hector chases after and destroys Greek fighters with the most shiny armour, and in an emblematic moment stamps onto the stage dragging a dead Greek in his splendid armour behind him, its burnished exterior containing only a quickly putrefying core (*T&C*. 5, 9. 1). The centre of the play holds only pustules erupting from an abscess in ever greater amounts. Hector is himself murdered in the most cowardly of fashions and his body dragged through the dust behind the horse of Achilles. There is no great confrontation between differing ideals, or the corruption of ideals by a malevolent force. All is already corrupt. Here we meet with supposed ideals that prove false and whorish rather than with pure ideals that are tragically sacrificed. The Trojans hold onto a worthless and flaky Helen while the Greeks fight for her already tarnished figure with machiavellian aplomb. To engage with *Troilus and Cressida* is to enter into the world of 'dead birds' imaged in its most radical form without redemption. As Dante entered the final abyss of hell where corrupt intellect joined forces with both monstrous power and malevolent will, so we enter the body strewn battlefield surrounding Troy.

In this world all is negotiable and open to exchange, even love. When Troilus finds out that Cressida must be taken from him and delivered to the Greeks after one night of bliss, he does not rail against the misfortune or fight for her to stay, he accepts the conditions of the commercial transaction substituting Cressida for Antenor with a 'Is it concluded so?' (*T&C*. 4, 2. 69) and prefers to dwell on her possible unfaithfulness. Their love, supposedly so pure, quickly perishes in the flames of the exchange market as she enters the Grecian camp and seeks out a replacement. The extra-ordinary feature of *Troilus and Cressida* is that nothing is able to stand in the way of this commercial logic, all

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(2000) where he shows the variety of love relationships in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*.

disintegrates into usable units that can be compared and bartered.<sup>20</sup> Warriors are weighed up, women passed around, ideals utilized for strategic ends, all for a meaningless war over spoilt goods. Only once the learning soul has fully negotiated the emptiness of this vision, fully contemplated the nature of nihilism, is it able to see some ray of light touching these depths. Experiencing *Troilus and Cressida* is to bottom out in nihilism in preparation for the catharsis of tragedy.

### Hamlet

With *Hamlet*, the first of the great tragedies, we see a character desperately attempting not to descend into this hell-hole. He has already experienced the split between love and lust to the core of his being with his mother marrying Claudius and ‘fornicating’ with him while the body of her much loved husband lies still fresh in the grave. This split carries over to Ophelia, who must get to a nunnery rather than continue her relationship with him. The happy state of undivided love between his father and mother suddenly mutates for Hamlet, leaving him in a divided world of chaste love and sweating lust, a state he transfers to his own relationship with the pure Ophelia. Hamlet is confronted with the lustful Tarquin emerging in the figure of his father’s murderer, Claudius, standing triumphant over the body of the dead King. Not only has this boar-like Brother killed the great King Hamlet, but he has destroyed the ‘chastity’ of his Mother by marrying her and fornicating with her in his father’s place. Hamlet is caught within the extremes of human magnificence and depravity between the examples of his father and uncle, between Hyperion and a satyr (*Ham.* 1, 2. 140), between the man-god of the sun and a creature half man half beast.<sup>21</sup> Within this overarching spectrum he has witnessed the triumph of beastly passion over virtue, symbolized by his mother’s capitulation to the advances of her husband’s lustful brother.

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<sup>20</sup> No surprise that *Troilus and Cressida* has found its most appreciative audiences only in this century. See Bevington’s (1998) introduction in the Arden Edition.

<sup>21</sup> This is well sketched out by Jenkins in his introduction to the Arden edition (1982).

[T]hat adulterate beast... won to his shameful lust the will of my most seeming-virtuous queen (*Ham.* 1, 5. 42–46).

Hamlet is given the task of restoring the rightful hierarchy, of replacing the satyr with Hyperion, yet to do it he himself must descend into bestial passion. He cannot push himself into these depths of action, his will is too weak and his mind too insightful to merely plunge into the red sea of revenge (as Laertes does without hesitation). The dark passions struggle to gain purchase on Hamlet's soul, even though he has already experienced the painful split between lust and love in both his mother and Ophelia and already has the brutal Tarquin-King in his sights. He cannot bring himself to enter murderous passion, his mind keeps finding possible faults that delay the charge of the boar inside himself. In *Hamlet* we see the most extended exploration of an Adonis figure unable to transform into his Tarquin-like opposite. Even though his vision of pure love between godlike figures has mutated into 'the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stew'd in corruption' (*Ham.* 3, 4. 93–4), he cannot act against it, cannot help being 'tardy', finds his purpose 'blunted' in the attempt to plunge into blood-lust for the sake of justice (*Ham.* 3, 4. 107–111). Hamlet works himself up into a passionate frenzy again and again, only to find himself losing purpose as the passion fades, caught like Pyrrhus with his sword frozen in the air.

All the sons around him show the ease of transformation: Hamlet's own dear father killed Fortinbras of Norway (*Ham.* 1, 1. 85–90), starting up a cycle of revenge in which the young Fortinbras raises troops against Denmark and what he sees as its Tarquin like King; Laertes passionately picks up the sword against the slayer of his father and cause of his beloved sister's death, Hamlet, now unwittingly in the very position of a Tarquin figure himself. Even the players show more purpose in acting than Hamlet does in reality. Yet Hamlet himself stands unwilling to enter this descent into revenge madness for the

sake of justice. He recognises that if he kills Claudius he will become like Claudius<sup>22</sup>. This is compounded by his already being a 'Claudius' for Laertes in his killing of Polonius. Within his own self Hamlet contains the extremes of good and evil, he ranges between the two without being able to hold them together coherently, causing death and destruction in his wake as he attempts to re-establish the correct balance between the two, until finally all events push towards one inevitable end, and Hamlet enters its stream with relief, actor and act undivided, living in the Action.

### Othello

The darker *Othello* begins at a stage hinted at in Hamlet – pure and undivided love. It zooms in to focus on the step by step process of unconditional love breaking down as Iago painfully introduces a lust filled whore into the chaste form of Desdemona, until, as Adonis did before him, Othello rejects pure love after seeing the dualistic vision. The effect is devastating and the honourable and brave Othello mutates in front of our eyes as the Boar roots into him.

Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess! handkerchief! O devil! (*Oth.* 4, 1. 40–43).

He falls into a trance with the triumphant Iago standing over him, victorious, the noble Moor slain with the medicine of the double vision. When Othello regains consciousness he is not an Adonis figure anymore, he is a Tarquin set on the destruction of Lucrece in the lovely form of Desdemona, but he is a Tarquin that has entered the realm of tragedy. We do not have a simple tale of lust destroying chastity. He arrives at her bed chamber,

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<sup>22</sup> Shown in the Mousetrap where Lucianus, the poisoner of the sleeping king, introduces himself as 'nephew to the king' (*Ham.* 3, 2. 239), coalescing in one image Hamlet and Claudius involved in a similar action – killing the King. See Harold Jenkins' Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1982) 145.

torch in hand, tormented with the raging split in his being, desperately wishing to restore the lost purity, but unable to do it without destroying the very being it exists within.

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!  
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,  
 It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood  
 nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow...  
 Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
 Put out the light, and then put out the light!  
 If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,  
 I can again thy former light restore  
 Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,...  
 I know not where is that Promethean heat  
 That can thy light relume (*Oth.* 5, 2. 1–14).

Othello then proceeds to commit the archetypal crime, he murders pure love.

### **Macbeth**

The consequences of such a fatal act are not explored in any detail by *Othello*, that is left to *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. With *Macbeth* we quickly reach the point of the archetypal crime, only now it is not the chaste Lucrece or Desdemona but the royal Duncan destined to be destroyed as Macbeth stalks towards the king's bedchamber 'with Tarquin's ravishing strides' (*Mac.* 2, 1. 55).<sup>23</sup> The prehistory to the deed has taken one act to establish. Macbeth is initially in a state of 'unconditional love', both with his wife<sup>24</sup> and

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<sup>23</sup> The murder is described in suggestive terms: 'Here lay Duncan, his silver skin lac'd with his golden blood; and his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature for ruin's wasteful entrance' (*Mac.* 2. 3. 111–114).

the king. He is quickly convinced to commit the act through the potent combination of witches and wife, ambition and imagination, so entering a world where 'fair is foul and foul is fair' (*Mac.* 1, 1. 2). Because Duncan fully occupies the position of betrayed purity, it allows a detailed exploration of a female figure clearing herself of these qualities – so we meet with Lady Macbeth 'top full of direst cruelty' (*Mac.* 1, 5. 44–45). Unlike Venus who plucks the transformed Adonis flower and places it between her breasts to fly away into transcendence, she works a different transformation on Macbeth:

Look like the innocent flower  
But be the serpent under it (*Mac.* 1, 5. 66–7).

It is not the flower of transcendence, but one that hides a Tarquin underneath. So we enter the most sustained exploration in Shakespeare's corpus of the process and consequences of becoming a Tarquin from a Tarquinian point of view.<sup>25</sup> In *Hamlet* we watched the process stop and start as the Adonis element argued for and against the charge and then hesitated in the act until nothing could be done to prevent it, making it happen with a kind of transcendent inevitability. With *Othello* we watched him helplessly struggle against the take over until he fell into a faint in front of Iago before rising as a Tarquin. We have not yet been given an inside look at a hero's transformation into Tarquin from the perspective of the emerging Tarquin himself. It is a study that reaches into the very heart of darkness, the very gates of hell (*Mac.* 2, 3. 1–2). 'Not in the legions of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd in evils to top Macbeth' (*Mac.* 4, 3. 55–7). It is Shakespeare's third shortest play, but there is no mercy in this, the journey down sears and burns as it perfects its representation of a negative transcendence where 'nothing is, but what is not' (*Mac.* 1, 3. 142), where life is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (*Mac.* 5, 5. 26–28). Within this world Macbeth ranges, caught between being

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<sup>24</sup> As Harold Bloom mordantly observes, they are the happiest married couple in all of Shakespeare's works (Bloom [1998] 518).

<sup>25</sup> I am following Hughes (1993) 239–255 closely here.

seduced by its empty promises, raging against its betrayal, and courageously resisting his fate to the last, but never escaping its grasp. It will take all the suffering of King Lear to enable such a feat.

### King Lear

*Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* perform a close up analysis of Adonis resisting the charge of the boar, of him succumbing to its thrust, and the full exploration of the nature of the arising Tarquin within a negative sublime. All of this is telescoped into the first hundred or so lines of *King Lear* so that a new phase can be explored in *extremis*. He transforms from venerated King into a raging tyrant who rejects both his most beloved daughter and most loyal subject, breaking the bonds of unconditional love, rejecting pure love and mutating into a Tarquin bent on abolishing pure love from his realm. All it takes is the ‘nothing’<sup>26</sup> of Cordelia to twist him round into the double vision, for he ‘loved her most, and thought to set [his] rest on her kind nursery’ (*Lear*. 1, 1. 122–3). Crucially, he does not kill her, and so for the first time in the tragic sequence pure love survives the Tarquinian onslaught. Yet Lear fatally still believes that true love exists in the form of his other two daughters, Goneril and Regan, and undergoes the trauma of being abused by both as they reveal the hell underneath their voluble love claims. In fearsome grandeur the old king rises into a Tarquinian fury, three times caused, only to find himself unable to carry out the act.

[Y]ou unnatural hags,  
I will have such revenges on you both

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<sup>26</sup> Cordelia’s famous ‘nothing’ can be read in two registers. From a character point of view, it can be read as showing her to be nervous, foolhardy, unprepared to compromise, strategically inept, dangerously honest etc. This is not the register this chapter is working in, as useful and powerful as it is. When listening with an ear tuned to the resonances of the traditional canon, the ‘nothing’ articulates the deepest mystery of true love – that it transcends verbal expounding. This transforms Cordelia into a symbol of love in its purest form, making her death doubly tragic.

That all the world shall – I will do such things –  
 What they are yet I know not... (*Lear*. 2, 4. 276–279).

He is too old, too powerless, and too wrapped up in the guilt of having banished pure love from his world. Besides which, Goneril and Regan combine into a fearful, powerful force that would crush any attempt of Lear to charge. Indeed it is now this female evil that slams the door shut and abandons Lear and his desperate train to the elemental storm outside. It is as if Virgil had left Dante alone outside the walls of Dis to face derangement on his own.

It is the defining moment in the Shakespearean corpus. The heath becomes the battleground where Tarquin is overcome, not by some bed trick, but through a transformation wrought in the most extreme of conditions. Shakespeare opens out to the world an alchemy of the soul agonizingly transforming itself into something new and beautiful after experiencing the ravages of the double vision and the loss of pure, unconditional love.<sup>27</sup> We are finally reaching the point where a crushed Adonis somehow mutates into a flower, not a lust driven Tarquin. It is a process of stripping the self of all its accretions – its pride, vanity, selfishness – until a point of compassion is reached where one feels the naked humanness we all share.<sup>28</sup> Only then does Poor Tom suddenly

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<sup>27</sup> Bradley traces the stages in the redemption of King Lear very effectively in *Shakespearean tragedy* (1904). This has led to major critical debate, mostly depending on whether the critic is Christian or not. See Elton's *King Lear and the gods* (1966) for a powerful agnostic riposte to Bradley, although I suspect that in the end, Mack's insight that Lear is all about what it is to be paradigmatically human in a world without gods is the most illuminating – see his *King Lear in our time* (1965).

<sup>28</sup> Lear reaches this in act 3 sc 4:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are  
 That bide the pelting of the pitiless storm,  
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides... defend you  
 From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en  
 Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;

jump out of the hovel to present Lear with what a human being is without any addendum and he cries out in recognition and sympathy

[T]hou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come; unbutton here (*Lear*. 3, 4. 104–107).

This insight does not mean that a miraculous cure is in sight. Lear still has to somehow alleviate the massive urge to destroy his evil daughters. This he does by abandoning the desire to physically destroy them, replacing it with a cathartic *acting* out of a trial scene where he judges them, slowly stilling the rage burning inside. When next he enters we meet him ‘*fantastically dressed with wild flowers*’ (*Lear*. 4, 6. 80). Self knowledge and compassionate wisdom glitter through the madness – ‘they told me I was everything; ‘tis a lie, I am not ague-proof’ (*Lear*. 4, 6. 103–104) and ‘none does offend, none’ (*Lear*. 4, 6. 166). But he is still within the grip of the double vision and it is this that still causes his collapse into nonsense, much like Othello’s ‘pish, noses and lips’:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
 Though women all above:  
 But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,  
 Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness,  
 There is the sulphurous pit – burning, scalding,  
 Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah! (*Lear*. 4, 6. 123–128).

But there is ‘one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse’ (*Lear*. 4, 6. 203–4), Cordelia, and crucially she is still alive, able to midwife the birth of her own father as a new child (*Lear*. 4, 7. 17). To the accompaniment of music Lear awakes from his raging madness into the gentle arms of Cordelia, as if Adonis suddenly woke to find himself

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Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel (*Lear*. 3, 4. 28–33).

ensconced between the breasts of Venus flying off to Paphos. He speaks with new found clarity and humility, his great rage killed in him (*Lear*. 4, 7. 60–80). But the world of Lear is not ready for Paphos, and in an unbearable stroke, Venus is killed in mid flight, leaving the newly awoken grey haired babe pitched past pitch of grief after tasting the warm bosom of pure love.<sup>29</sup> Shakespeare will devote his next play to exploring the possibility of extending the immanent transcendence so briefly tasted by Lear, of beauty and love surviving entry and abuse in this mortal world. We enter Shakespeare's most profound play, *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>30</sup>

### Antony and Cleopatra

I make this claim because it manages to hold together the tragic and romantic elements within an immanent mix. Within the tragedies there is either a negative sublime or a brief flowering of transcendence before it is brutally cut off. Within the Romances a clear divide between tragedy and transcendence occurs with the tragic vision being lifted up into a transcendent sphere by flower maidens and magicians. In *Antony and Cleopatra* both heroes die, but only after having fully lived both the immanent and transcendent effects of tragedy and romance. Antony will continually experience the double vision as Cleopatra betrays him again and again while continually returning to his overwhelming love for her (*A&C*. 4, 10. 22–30; 4, 12. 26). Cleopatra, in the infinite complexity of her womanhood, will both deceive and redeem Antony before gloriously sacrificing herself as did the Phoenix that frames this chapter. But this shimmering holding together of the immanent and the transcendent cannot survive the tragic death of both lovers, and so we

<sup>29</sup> Taken from Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem *No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief* (Washburn and Major [1998] 731).

<sup>30</sup> This judgement is becoming a common place as we work in the twenty first century (Wilders [1995]). The Romantic world of Hamlet and the tragic suffering of Lear now compete vigorously with the problem plays and *Antony and Cleopatra* for 'favourite' status (amongst others of course). If we take the insights of *The Phoenix and the Turtle* seriously, then *Antony and Cleopatra* can be read as an extended meditation on the simultaneous burning and transcending nature of love – of the heights and depths in every moment. This is another essay so I leave it here.

enter the darkest phase of Shakespeare's work with a world that has hung Cordelia, strangled Desdemona and drowned Ophelia, we enter the dark rage of *Timon of Athens* in a world where Love has died.

### **Timon of Athens**

It is a place dominated by black, of invective sustained for two acts. It begins with an Adonis figure unconditionally in love, not with a woman, but with a city – Athens – and its men. Timon bountifully shares his wealth with all, and while it lasts is surrounded by jovial friends. When he runs short of money and goes to the self same friends for help, they reject him and he falls into the double vision. Cursing the city he leaves its gates to lead a simple life in the wilderness, only to discover a fortune in gold when digging for roots. It results in his cave becoming a place of pilgrimage where soldiers, thieves, servants, poets and painters all go to be given a wealth of both misanthropic curses and riches. Timon hates with so much nihilism that he cannot even be persuaded to act negatively by launching a Tarquinian attack on the mother city with Alcibiades, another who has been treated foully by Athens. Timon curses both Alcibiades and his whores before giving him gold and sending him on his way with more curses for both him and Athens. As Alcibiades proceeds with his charge on Athens 'like a boar too savage' (*Tim.* 5, 1. 164), senators arrive at Timon's cave, desperate to stay the attack. Timon promises to reveal how to halt the charge of the boar and 'teach them how to prevent wild Alcibiades' wrath' (*Tim.* 5, 1. 202):

I have a tree which grows here in my close, that mine own use invites me to cut down, and shortly must I fell it; tell my friends, tell Athens...that whoso please to stop affliction, let him take his haste, come hither, ere my tree hath felt the axe, and hang himself (*Tim.* 5, 1. 204–211).

Savage irony suspends from these words. We have watched Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and Lear suffer on the tree as the Boar charged and transmogrified Adonis into a Tarquin who rises to rape, murder and destroy. Timon well knows that no one from Athens will

volunteer for such a labour, and that such a sacrifice is worthless in any case, for the boar charges regardless. All that is left is to chop the tree of tragic sacrifice down and somehow begin anew.

### Coriolanus

This tiring in the battle against Tarquin is finally exhausted in *Coriolanus*. As a warrior he had 'received in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts i'th'body...He had, before this last expedition, twenty five wounds upon him... Now it's twenty seven' (*Cor.* 2, 1. 146–150).<sup>31</sup> The repetitions are running out of steam and something new and transcendent awaits. In knowing so much of the Apocalypse, terror has tired and the face of Love behind it slowly opens. A new path emerges, simple in hindsight, but difficult to write for one so steeped in tragic blood that 'returning were as tedious as go o'er' (*Mac.* 3, 4. 138–9). Its surface manifestation involved the saving of the Lucrece figure from desecration with something better than a bed trick. From *Coriolanus* onwards the symbol of pure love located in the main female figures of *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* survive the Tarquinian attack. They facilitate the transformation of Adonis/Tarquin into something new with a full recognition and incorporation of the depths and power of darkness explored in the tragedies. These last four plays open out to transcendent rites that transform the storm of Tarquin into music and flowers and allow Venus at last to reach Paphos with her transformed beloved between her breasts.

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<sup>31</sup> By most counts, this is around Shakespeare's 27<sup>th</sup> play, 27 wounds received in creative battle, at least seven of which were sustained in the great fight against Tarquin (the tragedies?), a battle that raged until he finally managed to put Tarquin to rest in the transcendent Romances and stopped hanging himself on the tree of artistic affliction. This is all straight speculation of course, picking up on hints from Hughes, based on numbers that could mean other things or nothing. This accepted I would hazard that the seven wounds of Tarquin inscribed on Shakespeare's body would be: *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Troilus and Cressida* (5,2), *Measure for Measure* (2,2), *Othello* (4,1), *King Lear* (Acts 1,2,3,4), *Macbeth* (2,1), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (3,11; 4,10) It would mean that *Timon of Athens* comes as the death rattle of Tarquin before the Romances take off for Paphos.

## Pericles

With Pericles we meet a character able to withstand the charge of the boar. In a secularised Miracle play<sup>32</sup> he suffers all that fate throws at him with stoic endurance. He quickly meets with the double vision in Antioch when he discovers that the woman he wishes to marry is involved in an incestuous relationship with her father. Escaping their murderous clutches he swiftly finds his Lucrece figure in Thaisa, the beautiful princess of Pentapolis. Still a virgin, she will only surrender her innocence to her true beloved, as Pericles turns out to be. Happily and heavily pregnant, news reaches Pentapolis that the incestuous king and daughter of Antioch have died, leaving Pericles free to take up his rightful title as king of Tyre. Tragically their voyage meets with a violent storm and Thaisa apparently dies in childbirth, leaving Pericles with a daughter, born in the most extreme of conditions. The sailors insist on casting Thaisa overboard to calm the storm. Pericles places her in a watertight coffin and releases her to the wild sea. Realizing that the new borne babe will not survive the journey back to Tyre, Pericles heads for Tharsus, where he leaves his new born with Cleon and his evil wife Dionyza, not realizing the mortal danger he has left his daughter in. Even though he has not been personally responsible for the suffering and 'death' of pure love in the form of his wife, and her precious gift, Marina, Pericles has in effect cast his wife into the sea and abandoned his daughter to evil, unconsciously acting out the most extreme of Tarquinian roles. Yet the key point is that both females survive the onslaught, thus enabling a redemption scene not possible in the tragedies. Of greatest importance is the survival of pure love in these

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<sup>32</sup> This aspect is illuminatingly discussed by Hoeniger in his introduction to the Arden edition of *Pericles* 1963: lxxxviii–xc. Its structure is very unlike the tragedies and closely resembles the structure of medieval miracle plays in its use of a choric presenter, many loosely connected episodes set up in pageant mode, the benign supernatural powers and the overt educational end. I am not surprised that Shakespeare struggled initially to master this new genre after the depths of intensity reached by the tragedies. But within two years he had perfected the genre and added a whole range of experimental devices to again entrance his audiences with *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. To see these plays as the doddering moulderings of an exhausted genius is to mistake the radical experimentation and triumph over the rape of purity they so clearly embody.

extreme conditions, and all of Shakespeare's Romances are directed at manufacturing an adequate clearing for this flourishing.

So we meet Cerimon after the storm, a wise lord able to restore Thaisa to life with arts and music that will reach full height in the great Prospero. Thaisa, convinced that Pericles has died in the storm, swears chastity and takes herself off to Diana's temple. The interest then shifts to Marina and the danger she finds herself in. She is like the 'dove of Paphos' (*Per.* 4, Chorus.32) and this causes jealousy in the heart of Dionyza, for Marina makes her own daughter appear like a 'crow' (*Per.* 4, Chorus.32). In our first glimpse of Marina as a maiden she enters 'with a basket of flowers', but in quick succession she is almost murdered by Leonine, an assassin of Dionyza, ravished by pirates, and sold off to a brothel in Mytiline intent on promoting her virginity to arouse interest in breaking it. Yet all the men who enter her room leave transformed, having heard 'divinity preach'd there' (*Per.* 4, 5. 4). None are able to ravish her, all fall under the spell of her virtue, no man can deflower this flower maiden, innocence survives the depths. Unlike Ophelia who dies in a river of flowers, Marina continues to blossom. In the meantime, Dionyza, believing Marina to be dead, informs Pericles of the 'tragedy'. In deep mourning, having lost both wife and daughter, he travels across the seas to her funeral at Tharsus. Returning to Tyre he happens to drop anchor in Mytiline. Hearing of his grief it is arranged to bring Marina on board, for her exceptional gifts and virtue have had healing effects on many a gentleman there. All of this complicated machinery is merely a vehicle to reach the same place as Lear waking up to find his daughter radiantly leaning over him, except this time Desdemona will not die. Marina is a 'palace for the crown'd Truth to dwell in' (*Per.* 5, 1. 122). She is capable of taking the affliction of Pericles and '*smiling extremity out of act*' (*Per.* 5, 1. 138–9).<sup>33</sup> As Pericles slowly recognises that it is his daughter before him a rush of joy descends and he cries out

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<sup>33</sup> T.S. Eliot appreciated the power of these recognition scenes, especially in his touching poem *Miranda*. Boitani (1999) 171–179 traces the history of the poem and shows that two extremes of the recognition scene exist within it. Obviously there is the uplifting scene of *Miranda* and Pericles, but more ominously

O come hither, thou that beget'st him that did thee beget (*Per.* 5, 1. 194–5).

Mother Mary birthed her Creator, Marina does the same within a secular context. The nightmare tale of Tarquin raping his own soul and destroying its purity finally finds a redemption scene. Pericles exclaims 'I am wild in my beholding' (*Per.* 5, 1. 221), and suddenly Music fills his ears, the music of the spheres, heavenly music, and he falls into a visionary slumber in which Diana appears to him and instructs him to go to her temple in Ephesus or 'liv'st in woe' (*Per.* 5, 1. 245). The vision breaks the repetition of a dangerous pattern of revenge, for Pericles had set his purpose on Tharsus to 'strike the inhospitable Cleon' (*Per.* 5, 1. 250–1). Instead he meets with his long lost wife in Diana's Temple and all are reunited at last. It is a classically happy ending that avoids the rounds of revenge so entrenched in Oedipal drama, but one that has been hard won and has deep resonance despite its quickly drawn character. This play comes fourteen years<sup>34</sup> after *The Rape of Lucrece* launched the fearful Tarquin upon Shakespeare's world, his last three plays will perfect the overcoming won so tritely in this secular Miracle Play.

### Cymbeline

In *Cymbeline* all the plot variants from *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* come together in a Romantic mode. All the characters are thin – except for the luminous

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there is also the tragic waking of Hercules to the recognition that he has murdered his own family. Like Dante combining Elijah with Ulysses, we have in this poem another masterful capture of the heights and depths within one imaginal scene. This is a true sign of great teaching, to combine in the particular all the complexity of the total.

<sup>34</sup> At the end of the play Pericles undertakes to finally trim all the hair he has let grow since the terrible storm for his daughter's wedding day:

And now this ornament [ corrupt ] makes me look dismal will I cut to form; and what this  
fourteen years no razor touch'd to grace thy marriage-day I'll beautify (*Per.* 5, 3. 73–6).

I can see why commentators find it hard not to speculate on Shakespeare's life from his plays. The reference is similar to Timon's undertaking to chop the tree of affliction down.

Imogen, who occupies the redemptive centre of the play – so that detailed attention can be given to the mechanism of plot. The narrative hums with a telos honed in on a massive unification of the many into the one and a restoration of undivided love. We see this in the two forces ranged against each other, England and Rome, Protestant and Catholic, the ultimate split in the social fabric of spirit needing to be restored. The play occurs around the time of Christ, and within these massive backdrops we watch a familiar scenario work its logic. Posthumus and Imogen fall into undivided love and secretly marry, only to be separated by Imogen's angry father and king, Cymbeline, who wants her to marry the thuggish Cloten. Banished to Italy, Posthumus boasts of his wife's chastity to Iachimo, thus inaugurating the Tarquinian sequence.<sup>35</sup> Iachimo heads for Imogen's chaste bed chamber to seduce her, only to find her purity unswayable. Unlike Tarquin, he does not then proceed to rape Imogen. He secures enough damaging evidence from her sleeping form to convince Posthumus that he managed the seduction, thus initiating the double vision in which Posthumus curses Imogen and plots her death. All of this is merely a pastiche of King Lear and Othello, set to images from Shakespeare's two great poems, but the impetus now shifts to the survival of Imogen and her redemption of Posthumus. This transcendent ending is achieved by ensuring the death of Tarquin and the re-emergence of a transformed Adonis figure securely nestled between Venus' breasts. This assumes, of course, that the Lucrece figure survives the Tarquinian attack with her limpid chastity intact. All of this is achieved in *Cymbeline* through various plot devices.

Imogen manages to survive three Tarquinian attacks. Iachimo does not rape her and Posthumus' plan to murder her fails when his servant, Pisano, mercifully allows her to live. The third attack holds the most venom. Cloten sets off, dressed in Posthumus' clothes, to behead his rival and rape Imogen (*Cym.* 4, 1. 12–20), only to be beheaded

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<sup>35</sup> Posthumus imagines Iachimo seducing his wife – 'Perchance he spoke not, but like a full-acorn'd boar, a German one, cried 'O!' and mounted' (*Cym.* 2, 4. 167–169). What follows is pure invective against 'the woman's part' (*Cym.* 2, 4. 170–186), but as I mention later on, the image verges on the ridiculous – the charge of the boar is losing its energy, as Hughes would put it.

himself by Imogen's long lost brother, Guiderius. As if this is not enough for our Heroine, she is also attacked by a force more malevolent than Tarquin....

Tarquin\Cloten's mother. She provides Pisanio with a venomous poison and informs him that it is medicine for Imogen. Little does she know that the doctor making the medicine has only provided her with a powerful sleeping draught that simulates death. This provides a mechanism through which both Posthumus and Imogen can enter a world in which each think the other dead, while neither are actually so. Imogen awakes from the 'fatal' poison, *covered in flowers*, to the beheaded body of Cloten, dressed in Posthumus' clothes, and mistakes him for her husband. Quickly captured by the Romans she declares 'I am nothing' (*Cym.* 4, 2. 367).<sup>36</sup> Posthumus, on the evidence of a bloody cloth, thinks Imogen dead and enters a world past redemption. He sets off to die, heroically fighting the invading Romans. All of this sets up a final scene (*Cym.* 5, 5) wherein what was truly evil (Cloten's mother\Cymbeline's second wife) dies, and what was good (Posthumus and Imogen) come alive again to each other. All broken unities are restored: Imogen and Posthumus; Imogen and Cymbeline; Posthumus and Cymbeline; Imogen's brothers and Cymbeline; Posthumus and Iachimo; Rome and Britain; etc etc. Shakespeare replays the whole play in one scene (486 lines) and reunites all that was broken into a new harmony. Yet as successful as the reunification is, it lacks drama, resulting in *Cymbeline* being one of Shakespeare's least popular plays. But we can already see the clear lines of a path that leads beyond tragedy, and in Shakespeare's last two plays he produces works of transcendent genius that attempt to enact on stage the complete journey of a learning soul from the depths to the heights in a manner that sustains the heights.

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<sup>36</sup> This is the cry of recognizing that love is dead, so powerfully articulated by Sophocles – Creon cries out with the death of his wife and son 'I'm no one. Nothing' (*Antigone* 1446). In the full face of Greek tragedy and his own, Shakespeare re-finds fullness.

## The Winter's Tale

First, in *The Winter's Tale*, we watch Leontes descend into the depths of jealousy<sup>37</sup> and revenge against the two people most precious to him – Hermione his wife, and Polixenes his earliest and dearest boyhood friend. King Polixenes flees for his life back to Bohemia after his nine month stay, leaving the nine months pregnant Hermione to face the unsubstantiated jealousy of her husband. Having just given birth she is dragged into court to face charges of adultery as her newly born ‘bastard’ daughter is cruelly sent away to be burned. Leontes refuses to listen to her defence, or that of her doughty friend, Paulina, preferring to convict his loving wife to death. It is the tragic sequence replayed at high intensity. Even when the Oracle of Apollo pronounces ‘Hermione is chaste; Polixenes blameless...Leontes a jealous tyrant; his innocent babe truly begotten; and the king shall live without an heir, *if that which is lost be not found*’ (*WT*. 3, 2. 132–136), Leontes viciously rejects the verdict with ‘There is no truth at all i’ th’ Oracle: the sessions shall proceed’ (*WT*. 3, 2. 140–141). Retribution is swift. A servant rushes into the court with the news that the young prince, Mamillius, has died from fear of what might happen to his mother. The full extent of Leontes’ crime descends on him. As Hermione faints away at the news Leontes wakes up to the consequences of his own ravages. Thinking his wife,

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<sup>37</sup> Two of Shakespeare’s greatest passages illuminate his state of nihilistic jealousy:

Is whispering nothing...is this nothing?  
 Why then the world, and all that’s in’t, is nothing,  
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,  
 If this be nothing (*WT*. 1, 2. 284–96).

And

There may be in the cup  
 A spider steep’d, and one may drink, depart,  
 And yet partake no venom (for his knowledge  
 Is not infected); but if one present  
 Th’ abhorr’d ingredient to his eye, make known  
 How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,  
 With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider (*WT*. 2, 1. 39–45).

son and daughter dead, all because of his insane, jealous rage, Leontes undertakes to bear the 'shame perpetual'. Tears will be his only recreation, sorrows his only destiny 'so long as nature will bear up with this exercise' (*WT*. 3, 2. 236–243). Tarquin has awoken to the madness of his deed only after the crime has been committed. Unlike Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and Lear where death of the hero follows the rape of the soul, Leontes survives and enters a world of endless penance. At this point the play completely changes registers and hones in on a 'blossom' (*WT*. 3, 3. 46) that survives the storm.<sup>38</sup>

It is marked by Shakespeare's strangest stage direction. Hermione's babe, Perdita, is abandoned to the stormy elements on the coast of Bohemia by Antigonus (Paulina's husband), who exits comically, 'pursued by a bear' (*WT*. 3, 3. 58). The charge of the wild, so fearsome in the tragedies, increasingly loses its purchase. Posthumus' image of the 'German boar' crying 'O!' as it mounted his wife verges on the ludicrous, the Bear chasing down Antigonus and snacking on his shoulder bone shifts tragedy into farce. It is a clown who witnesses the event and as he tells his story to a Shepherd they look down to discover Perdita. The Shepherd declares:

Now bless thyself: thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born (*WT*. 3, 3. 112–113).

The rest of the play will focus on 'things new-born'. The Shepherd tenderly picks up Perdita and carries her off to his pastoral home. As Autolycus sings 'red blood reigns in

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<sup>38</sup> The profoundness of this shift can be seen when comparing *The Winter's Tale* to Sophocles' *Antigone*. This foundational tragedy also has a king who drives a woman to 'death' through his own refusal to listen to reason, also has an oracle that declares the consequences of his actions will be the 'death' of his son, also has a woman caught in limbo, yet crucially Antigone dies in limbo, along with Haemon, her betrothed. In *The Winter's Tale* Hermione survives and transforms tragedy into romance. There are unmistakable resonances between these two plays, especially the 'trial scenes' (*Antigone* 701–860 and *Winter's Tale* Act 3) where Haemon/Hermione argue the case of innocence against a tyrannical king. But the endings are so different, and it to this that we are working.

the winter's pale' (*WT*. 4, 3. 4), we forget the icy ravages of Sicilia and enter the spring of Bohemia, with its flowering romance between Perdita and the son of Polixenes, Florizel. In the magical Act 4 Scene 4, the power of pure love is given its fullest rendition. We meet Perdita adorned with flowers and hear Florizel's glowing tribute to her

These your unusual weeds, to each part of you  
Do give a life: no shepherdess, but Flora  
Peering in April's front (*WT*. 4, 4. 1–3).

Unlike Marina and Imogen who suffered attacks on their chastity before emerging triumphant, Perdita has been protected from this and is able to enter the phase of new love unharmed. Like Rosalind before her she deflates the high flung praise with the earthy recognition that she is merely a 'poor lowly maid, most goddess-like prank'd up' (*WT*. 4, 4. 9–10). But unlike the Forest of Arden, the rages of Tarquin can enter the feast and threaten its destruction. Polixenes smuggles himself into the feast and angrily beholds his princely son cavorting with a maid dressed in flowers. The contrast between father and son is wrenching. Florizel declares his pure love for Perdita after she has offered herself to him, like Venus before her, as 'a bank, for love to lie and play on' (*WT*. 4, 4. 130–131):

When you do dance, I wish you  
A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do  
Nothing but that, move still, still so,  
And own no other function. Each your doing,  
So singular in each particular,  
Crowns what you are doing, in the present deeds,  
That all your acts are queens (*WT*. 4, 4. 140–146).

Polixenes, in a terrible rage, throws down an oath against their love

And you, enchantment—... If ever henceforth thou  
 These rural latches to his entrance open,  
 Or hoop his body more with thy embraces,  
 I will devise a death as cruel for thee  
 As thou art tender to't (*WT*. 4, 4. 435–442).

It forces the young lovers to flee Bohemia for Sicilia and so begins the staging of Leontes' redemption and the most cathartic healing of the tragic divide yet conceived in the Shakespearean corpus.

Unlike the welter of redemption scenes in *Pericles* and *Coriolanus*, *The Winter's Tale* focuses only on that of Leontes and Perdita with Hermione. Leontes' reunification with both his daughter and childhood friend are described second hand by various onlookers, allowing a single minded concentration on the healing of the massive first wound in the astonishing Act 5 scene 3. Leontes, Polixenes, Florizel, Perdita and others go to Paulina's gallery to look upon a statue of the long dead Hermione. They find an astoundingly real rendition: she has wrinkles that hint at the sixteen years past, it appears as if she breathes, that her veins carry blood, that 'life seems warm upon her lip' (*WT*. 5, 3. 66). Leontes cries out in grief '[W]e are mock'd with art' (*WT*. 5, 3. 68). For sixteen years he has endured the wrong he did himself (*WT*. 5, 1. 9), much as Tarquin discovered after the act that he had destroyed his own soul – only Tarquin did not live to see his own redemption. Now his 'soul' stands before him, seemingly restored by the magic of art. To the stirring of faith and the sound of music, the statue awakes and Hermione descends in grace to Leontes and embraces him, redeeming her beloved husband from the crime he inflicted on himself/her, lifting him towards Paphos.<sup>39</sup> The massive circuit of pure love destroyed

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<sup>39</sup> The classical myth of Pygmalion and the coming alive of his statue is an obvious source for this scene. Pygmalion rejects all women and resolves to live unmarried, creating for himself instead a perfect statue of womanhood. Pygmalion prays to Venus for the animation of his beautiful art work. She grants his request, and from their virginal union is born the lovely Paphos, from which the name of the city sacred to Venus is

and restored, mapped out in Shakespeare's two long poems, has finally found its aesthetic catharsis, Lucrece is brought back to life through art and embraces the suffering Tarquin. In Shakespeare's last play he will devote all his energy to casting an enchanting spell that will protect pure love from Tarquinian madness – we enter the magical world of Prospero.

### The Tempest

It has been twelve years since we left the magical forest of Arden, twelve years since Melancholy Jacques went off in search of things other than dancing measures, twelve years of tragedy that have left the forest battered and full of dark forces.<sup>40</sup> Yet now we meet a man who has been able to dominate and calm these forces, subdue its evil charge and liberate its magical good. He has drunk from the cup of the spider and alchemized its contents into good. Within *The Tempest* the whole tragic nexus, predominant in the Tragedies and halved in the Romances, is reduced to a backdrop that has already been mastered – the storm of jealousy and passion will now occur on a bed of peace. Ensnared on a magical island, Prospero tells his daughter, Miranda, of how his Adonis-like position as Duke of Milan was usurped by his Tarquin like brother, Antonio, of how he had been wrapped up with secret studies in his library while he allowed his trusted brother to administer his Dukedom, of how his brother (with the encouragement of the King of Naples) took his kingdom and hurried Prospero and his young daughter onto 'a rotten carcass of a boat...to cry to the sea that roar'd to us' (*Temp.* 1, 2. 146–149). Only the kindness of Gonzalo, who had been appointed to carry out this nefarious plan, saved them. He provided the usurped Duke with 'rich garments' and the books that he prized above his dukedom before condemning them to the storm. Surviving the storm they

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taken, and to which my chapter on Shakespeare continually flies towards. The painting of Paphos by Ingres sits in my mind as I write this – an astounding vision of life and art mixing to form beauty.

<sup>40</sup> Hughes makes this observation in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1993) 381 and I wish to state my thanks to him again for his ten year labour on this synthetic vision of Shakespeare that I have found so useful in writing this chapter.

landed on the island where Prospero had spent the last twelve years educating his precious daughter and perfecting the art of his magical powers. This art had been crucial to their survival. On the island was the evil Caliban – born of the blue eyed witch Sycorax – whom Prospero was able to dominate and place under his service in a twelve year struggle. There also was the good sprite Ariel, imprisoned into a cloven pine by the evil witch for his refusal to obey her malevolent commands. She had died before releasing Ariel, and Prospero had saved the sprite from eternal suffering on the tree.<sup>41</sup> In exchange for his release, Ariel was bound to Prospero, becoming the medium through which Prospero's powers were practiced. In the tragedies we have watched various Calibans take over various Prosperos and rape or murder the embodiment of pure love. In the three Romances, pure love had survived the assault, but Posthumus and Leontes still underwent the charge of the boar and the transformation into Tarquin. With Prospero, we see a figure able to dominate and transform the charge without having to go through its tragic transformations, as is clearly shown in his relationship to his slave,<sup>42</sup> Caliban.

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<sup>41</sup> By releasing Ariel from the tree, the promise of Timon to cut down the tree of suffering is fulfilled, allowing a different voice to be released, one of magic and transcendence that is able to stop the charge of the boar in its tracks.

<sup>42</sup> I have not entered into the massive debates surrounding the contribution of post-modern, feminist, new historicist and cultural materialist readings of Shakespeare. I am sympathetic to their new readings of Shakespeare, especially those of Greenblatt's *Shakespearean negotiations : the circulation of social energy in Renaissance England* (1988) ilk, but find the attempts to glorify the marginal within Shakespeare painful. To celebrate Macbeth's witches as the 'heroines of the piece' as Eagleton does in his *William Shakespeare* (1986) 2 is to place current concerns wilfully onto the text. Much the same tends to happen with Freudian, Feminist and Materialist readings. Caliban's upliftment into a symbol of colonialist exploitation is to the point over here (see Dollimore and Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare* [1985] for a good illustration). I find Bloom's observation telling on these trends – Shakespeare deepens Freud, not the other way round – so imagine what he does to the post-moderns. See his *The western canon* (1995) for continual and entertaining sniper shots at the post-modern.

Crucially, their first relationship was one of Prospero teaching Caliban how to express himself in language, of 'how to name the bigger light, and how the less' (*Temp.* 1, 2. 338). The pedagogical task of teaching a Tarquin to express himself, of introducing his dark force to the medium of language, is the most difficult and dangerous of endeavours. Shakespeare had managed such a feat in his problem plays and tragedies where Iagoes and Edmunds root their darkness into waiting Adonises. As Caliban opened to the freedom of expression under the tutelage of Prospero he found himself enamoured with his teacher:

[T]hen I loved thee,  
 And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,  
 The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place, and fertile:  
 Cursed be I that did so! All the charms  
 Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!  
*For I am all the subjects that you have* (*Temp.* 1, 2. 338–343, my emphasis).

It is as if the powerful charge that gave Shakespeare the bottomless depths of his problem plays and tragedies is railing against this arrest in the romances, of being imprisoned in hard rock 'whiles you do keep me from the rest o' the island' (*Temp.* 1, 2. 345–6).

Prospero responds to the charge:

Thou most lying slave, whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,  
 filth as thou art, with human care; and lodged thee in mine own cell, till thou didst  
*seek to violate the honour of my child* (*Temp.* 1, 2. 346–350, my emphasis).

It is the classical Tarquinian scenario, the rape of pure being. Caliban is not sorry for the attempt.

O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! Thou did'st prevent me; I had peopled else  
 this isle with Calibans (*Temp.* 1, 2. 351–3).

He would have filled the stage with the rape and murder of pure Being, with curses and nihilism, with the tirades of Tarquin. Prospero had taught 'a thing most brutish', that gabbled without knowing its meaning, how to name its dark purposes. Caliban responds:

You taught me language; and my profit on't is, I know how to curse (*Temp.* 1, 2. 365–6).

Within *The Tempest* this element is almost always under control, maintained as a slave on a barren rock while the rest of the isle fills with music, magic, flowers, and Miranda wanders about in innocent purity, protected from the Tarquinian charge. It allows Prospero to set up his most difficult project – the marriage of innocence to experience without the charge of the boar. Through the powers of Ariel – released from the tragic tree – he has manufactured the safe shipwrecking of his evil brother Antonio on the island, along with the king of Naples, and his good son Ferdinand. By the end of the first act, Ferdinand and Miranda have met and fallen in love, she finding in him 'a thing divine' (*Temp.* 1, 2. 421) and he, after quickly establishing that she is still pure and innocent (*Temp.* 1, 2. 429), desperate to marry her. It sets in motion Prospero's great and magical design to ground purity without tragedy.

Prospero uses his enchanting powers to call up pure spirits to celebrate and bless the unadulterated union, the 'contract of true love' (*Temp.* 4, 1. 133 ). As they gracefully dance in celebration 'Prospero starts suddenly, and speaks; after which, to a strange, hollow, and confused noise, they heavily vanish' (*Temp.* stage instruction 4, 1. 138). Enraptured by the union of pure love, Prospero had forgotten about the beast Caliban and his plot of murder and rape. The sudden touch of baseness within the music of limpid purity deflates the vision, and brings back with searing clarity the true nature of existence and the need to be watchful. Yet the blessing has been performed, the uniting of true love achieved, left now is the protection of pure love from the Tarquinian charge. This time round the hunting dogs will not be baying at the loss of their master to the attack of the

boar. As Caliban and his cohorts enter Prospero's chamber, boaring in on murder and rape, they are attacked by diverse Spirits in the shape of hunting dogs, with Prospero and Ariel setting them on until they are driven out (*Temp.* stage instructions 4, 1. 254). The whole Tarquinian sequence has been defeated, pure love has been protected, signalling the culmination of the Prosperoian mission.

Now does my project gather to a head:

My charms crack not, my spirits obey...

The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance (*Temp.* 5, 1. 1–2; 27–28).

Only now can Prospero release his good spirit, Ariel, to freedom, only now can he release with forgiveness his evil brother and the King of Naples from their spell bound captivity, only now can Prospero abandon his 'potent art' (*Temp.* 5, 1. 50) – 'this rough magic I here abjure;...and, deeper than did ever plummet sound, I'll drown my book (*Temp.* 5, 1. 50–7). Left is the final recognition that this Caliban who lusts after purity, rapes innocence, murders goodness, has stalked the stage in so many incarnations, is actually the shadow of Prospero:

This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine (*Temp.* 5, 1. 275–6).

It frees Caliban to 'seek for grace', while pure love enters a secular world secured, and Prospero leaves the bare island of the stage to retire to his dukedom where 'every third thought shall be of my grave'. With Tarquin defeated, Adonis alive, Lucrece saved, Venus restored to full being, beautiful Paphos seen again, Prospero puts off his magic mantle and returns to everyday life with 'tolerable wisdom'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Taken from Derek Mahon's beautiful poem 'A Tolerable Wisdom' in his *Selected poems* (2000). The profundity of this wisdom is seen when comparing the late work of Sophocles to that of Shakespeare. In *Oedipus at Colonus* we see an aged Oedipus developing his daemoniac power, but it is one that provides a curse on Thebes while protecting Athens, whereas Prospero uses his magic to unite opposite forces and

## Closing

As Shakespeare retired from the stages of London for the propertied life of Stratford, he left a corpus of work unmatched in the western canon. Often the sheer individual brilliance of lines, speeches, characters, plays, poems and sonnets explode against the larger backdrop of his achievement, and we are blinded to the larger movements of his work. Yet if we allow his collected works to wash over us in rough sequence, an exquisite secularised education of the human being begins. It is one that had no prepared path, that refused to accept the journeys of those before as anything but source material, but, as we stand back, a journey of a learning soul into its own desecration and healing presents itself that still plays out in our modern world with all its astounding force. Yet as we hear the crystal sound of the phoenix singing its rebirth we recognise that it is not this end point that makes Shakespeare worthwhile, as if his whole work holds together on the successful completion of the journey. Each line of his work speaks the intrinsic beauty of human existence, its love and hate, anger and tranquillity, falseness and truth, all fall from his hand with an equal music, celebrating this flow of vital energy called life. Yes

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ground love. Indeed, Oedipus ends cursing his sons in ways very similar to Lear's curse on his daughters, yet we then see an alchemy of change within Shakespeare's tragic nexus, beginning with the heath and ending with a wise Prospero and assorted flowering maidens. Yet even in Sophocles we find the old Oedipus finding his resting place in the grounds of the Awesome Goddesses (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 110) after suffering the full heights and depths of human existence. Oh to have the collected plays of Sophocles standing next to Shakespeare.

## Chapter Eleven: Descartes<sup>1</sup>

### Opening

And Descartes<sup>2</sup> takes the learning soul on a journey into itself to find certainty, perfection and God. He plunges himself into an abyss of demonic doubt before emerging from the

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<sup>1</sup> Why Descartes? With the shift into secular traditions already marked by Shakespeare, I did not want to go back to another religious account, even though the seventeenth century contained some of the most impressive texts of this kind. It meant the exclusion of a number of outstanding texts: Teresa of Avilla's *Interior castle* and John of the Cross' *Dark night of the soul* contain some of the most profound and haunting accounts of the journey of the learning soul inwards and upwards and do so within a register of darkness so different to the pedagogues of light we have met with up to now. Also excluded were the beautiful works of Francis de Sales who broke with predestination in preference of a pedagogy of superabundant love in his two great texts: *Introduction to the devout life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. So too Pascal's great *Pensées* was excluded in all its unfinished brilliance. Yet I did not want to give another account from the fields of Literature – besides who would adequately come after Dante and Shakespeare? This again meant the exclusion of a whole number of texts falling within my criteria, some of the most outstanding being the following: John Bunyan's profoundly simple *The pilgrim's progress*. Milton's *Paradise lost* and *Paradise regained*, and Moliere's *Plays*. It was also my last chapter and I wanted to end at the beginning of the Modern. Descartes presented himself as the obvious candidate. More importantly, his *Meditations* fell specifically into the range of criteria I was interested in and spoke back to Plato, Augustine and Abelard in profound ways. Beginning with Plato and ending with Descartes gave a definite sense of closure to the selections with an account of the journey of the learning soul in modern idiom.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes was born in 1596, lived 53 years and died in 1650, leaving behind works that would eventually result in him being called the first Modern philosopher. Most of his education occurred at a Jesuit college called La Fleche (from 10–18), and like many of the Jesuit colleges of the time, his education was rigorous, well-ordered and multi disciplined. In 1615 he went to University at Poitiers where he studied and qualified in Law. At the age of 22 he enlisted in the army, most probably in the Engineering Corps, where he met and worked with the mathematician Beeckman, writing up a treatise on mathematical harmony in Music that went back to the Pythagorean fascination with ratios. He left the army in 1619 and in November of the same year, while working intensely on mathematical issues in a stove heated room, had a daytime vision and three night-time dreams of astounding force. Interpretations are controversial, but Descartes took them to be a divine summons to unfold a wonderful science from first principles. For six years documentation on his life is vague, although his inherited property was sold in France in 1622, providing him with the income

vortex cleansed of scepticism with the subjective certainty of his own pure being and the objective certainty of a Good and Perfect God. With these heights secured he returns to

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necessary for a life of philosophical enquiry. But it is only in 1625 that we again can reconstruct his life and he emerges in Paris, friendly with the influential, well read and connected Father Mersenne. It is through Mersenne that Descartes' work on natural philosophy was disseminated to the leading intellectuals of France. He also worked on a book eventually abandoned half way – *Rules for the Direction of Mind*. Descartes left Paris in 1628 and moved around, continuously working on his great synthesis of natural philosophy called *The World*. Yet when it was finally ready for publication in 1633, Galileo was condemned for his belief in a Copernican Universe, a view that *The World* also argued for, so Descartes withdrew it from publication. So it was only four years later, at the age of 40, that Descartes published his first great work, the *Discourse on Method*. In it he clearly outlines the basic metaphysical principles of Cartesian science. He also attached three essays from the abandoned *World* that made crucial interventions in optics and meteorology, but his most important addition was *Le Geometrie* in which he revealed techniques of combining geometry and algebra, assisting the key project of mathematizing the physical world. Between these years he became a father, the mother was a domestic servant by the name of Helene, the daughter's name, Francine, and after publication of the *Discourse* Descartes attempted to build a family life for the three of them. Tragically Francine died at the age of five, and in the same year (1640) both his father and sister also died. All of this occurred in the middle of Descartes writing his great masterpiece that is the focus of this chapter, the *Meditations*. The quiet room and solitude of the coal stove that began the *Meditations* were not to be a part of Descartes' life after its publication. He was intermittently attacked for his radical views by Voetius, an influential theologian, to the point where Descartes feared that he would be declared a heretic and exiled. Furthermore, contradictory implications to his System were picked up on, forcing him to enter into the messy world of human emotion to explain how mind and body interacted with each other. Yet he was determined to ensure that his ideas would become the source of a new orthodoxy that replaced the Scholastic tradition of Aristotle/Aquinas. To this end he wrote a textbook called *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) in which he summarized all his work in one, easily accessible text. During this time he also worked on *Passions of the Soul*, a text that arose mainly out of correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia on the vexed topic of mind/body dualism, eventually publishing it in 1650. In it he attempted to give an account of how emotions arose through the brain's interaction with the soul. By this time he had fled the persecutions of Voetius and taken up an offer from Princess Christina of Sweden to set up an Academy and be her tutor. The second request was to prove fatal. Descartes was a notoriously late riser, doing most of his thinking in bed, while the princess took her lessons in the early morning. He contracted a serious respiratory infection and died, a young 53, but with a body of work that inaugurated a new philosophy and contributed to a new physics and world view.

the cave of physicality to live a life illuminated by God and reason. Like Plato, Plotinus, Augustine and Bonaventure before him, he finds within himself an essence of pure mind beyond all matter, and resting in that mind finds an overwhelming intuition of Pure Being. With these two certainties he returns to the world to build a new science that will be able to suffer the travails of chance and deception in earthly existence and stand as a palace of Truth for all who follow his method to live within. Descartes is clear that the truths he finds within himself and through himself are not novel for ‘nothing is older than the truth’ (AT VII: 3), but he undertakes to sift through the reasons given for the Truth of God and soul for those which produce clear and distinct assent from all who attend to the process. Such will be the *Meditations* – a technique to procure the necessary concurrence of all reasonable beings that knowing God is the most obvious and clear of thoughts and that the Soul is pure of any material corruption. It will attempt to stand immaculate on its own, like the Poem of Dante or a sonnet of Shakespeare, except its ground will not be aesthetic beauty but intellectual clarity as it charts the depths and heights with an internal dynamic that takes the learner on a journey into his own soul and then back outwards to live in the everyday world as a real, living human being.

The driving force of Descartes’ turning into himself to truly know himself is the understanding that such a path leads inwards to the soul and upwards towards God.<sup>3</sup> Many great men have undertaken the path before him and given good reasons for doing

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<sup>3</sup> After quoting from Proverbs and Romans in his introduction to the *Meditations* Descartes goes on–

[I]t seems as though we were shown that all that which can be known of God may be made manifest by means which are not derived from anywhere but from ourselves and from the simple consideration of the nature of our minds. Hence I thought it not beside my purpose to inquire how this is so, and how God may be more easily and certainly known than the things of the world (Wilson *The essential Descartes* [1969] 155).

Granted this quote is taken from his justification of the *Meditations* to the Sacred Faculty of Theology in Paris, but we will see that the actual *Meditations* consistently follow the path of Wisdom traced by the great Theologians of Christianity – Paul, Augustine and Bonaventure amongst many others. See Men’s *Descartes and Augustine* (1998) for an excellent discussion.

so, but Descartes embarks on the journey of finding proofs of such illuminating clarity that no human mind 'will ever discover better ones' (AT VII: 4). The conditions for following him on this journey is that the reader desires to meditate seriously with him and that they can 'withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions' (AT VII: 9). The reader must be prepared to head on a journey into the Alone. Only those few that manage to reach a state of pure mind will fully appreciate the *Meditations*. Indeed, the first two meditations will directly provide a technique to achieve a state of pure mind. Only in such a state will the rest of the *Meditations* bring on significance. Taking Descartes injunctions seriously,<sup>4</sup> let us trace the path he blazes for the learning soul on its way to God.

### Quiescence

The first state of mind to achieve is one that has successfully detached itself from the senses. This is necessary to remove from the mind all learned prejudices and errors accumulated through the years of schooling and habit that could interfere with its clear functioning. Basic requirements for attaining such a state are delivering the mind from every care, not being agitated by any passions, and sustained leisure time in a tranquil environment (AT VII: 18). Only in such quiet can the massive upheaval and demolition of all former opinions and beliefs take place. To dis-order the inner life, the outer life has to be uncluttered. Yet even with such peaceable conditions, separation of the mind from the effect of the senses is exceptionally difficult, especially when we tend to accept what our senses tell us as being most true and certain. Descartes suggests increasingly rigorous and pervasive techniques of uprooting and discarding all the experiences we have had through doubting their obvious legitimacy to leave us finally with pure mind. The first

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<sup>4</sup> I will take this injunction extremely seriously. Rather than reattempt a defence of Descartes' arguments and proofs, I will focus on what states of mind he attempts to generate as a reader meditates on his text. Hence I make no apologies if my presentation does not exactly trace out the order of reasons and their various problematics\weaknesses, as I am working with a different focus – a sympathetic entering into the actual meditative states suggested by the *Meditations*.

procedure is to meditate on how deceptive the senses can be, on how they seem to tell us one thing when actually something else is happening, especially when things are obscured or happening far away. Such a technique does not get us any great distance for we have a powerful impression of our own reality, of our own bodies and its immediate environment. The obvious truth of such experiences makes it hard to eliminate them from our minds. Descartes suggests a second technique, that we imagine what we are immediately experiencing as actually a dream. Rather than being where we are right now we are actually asleep and dreaming this very act of reading. Such a thought successfully questions the assumed obviousness of our everyday experiences, for we might not be sensing an outside world but dreaming one up instead. This thought gets us to question the validity of our senses more radically, but leaves untouched the building blocks of the dream\reality nexus, for dreams use the same elements found in the waking world, only condense and displace them into exotic medleys. Yet perhaps it is possible to have a dream so bizarre that nothing similar to it has ever been sensed in reality. Even this does not get us away from the outside world, for we are dreaming in its colours, and using its basic and universal elements to construct the flight of the imagination. We might be able to doubt everything that is built up of composite things (AT VII: 20) but it is exceptionally difficult to remove from our minds the very simple and general principles of time, space and number that underpin both reality and dreams. Yet even these must be challenged and uprooted to arrive at pure mind. To eliminate these very simple, very general, building blocks of existence, Descartes imagines that it is conceivable that an all powerful spirit could trick him into having perceptions of earth, body, magnitude, place, time when no such things exist, except in his mind. Furthermore, the intuitive certainty with which  $2 + 3 = 5$  and the obviousness of a square having four sides could also be a sustained deception, for have not others been deceived in what they think they know best, and is it not possible for an all powerful spirit to enable such a deception? If we decide to make God less powerful than this, then the more likely becomes the imperfection of his creation, resulting in the same doubt. Such a thought results in reaching a position where

nothing formerly held as true has been left *untouched* by doubt. We recognise that the mask is strange, however like.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty with the meditation so far is that although it has managed to doubt the full range of belief and experience, the doubt is of a weak and improbable kind, especially when compared to the habits of mind that continue to accept as highly probable the existence we find ourselves in and the truths we believe in. Descartes understands the difficulty and so sets himself up to pretend for a certain time that all his opinions are *entirely* false until he can reach a state of mind in which a balance has been reached between doubt and affirmation, a state of mind in which his judgement will lie neutral, unable to assert itself on any matter, no matter how obviously true (AT VII: 22). It is in order to attain such a state of stasis that he imagines that there is an evil genius, as powerful as he is deceitful, actively engaged in continually manipulating him.

I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are naught but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things; I shall remain obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power [i.e. suspend my judgement], and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be (AT VII: 22–3, Haldane and Ross Translation).

This state of mind involves a heightened state of wakefulness to every single sensation. All must be watched without falling into the trap of agreeing or disagreeing with it. A state of pure equanimity must be reached with no attachment allowed towards any object

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<sup>5</sup>Adapted from Wallace Stevens (1945) 181

or sensation. All of existence must float by the watchful mind in a state of radical sameness where both non-acceptance and non-rejection hold. No matter how powerful the call to assent, the cry of existence for the mind to get itself wet in matter, the meditator must stand firm in his quiescence. It is an incredibly difficult state to maintain and Descartes describes his own difficulties in sustaining the state—

[T]his task is a laborious one, and insensibly a certain lassitude leads me into the course of my ordinary life. And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged, so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions, and I dread awakening from this slumber, lest the laborious wakefulness which would follow the tranquillity of this repose should have to be spent not in daylight, but in the excessive darkness of the difficulties which have just been discussed (AT VII: 23 Haldane and Ross).

It is a masterful description of a contemplator fully aware of the level of involvedness needed to sustain the state and the ease with which it slips away. Like the captive within the cave of shadows suddenly becoming aware that all he has taken to be real and true are only phantoms on a wall, the temptation is to slip back into the reverie for fear of confronting the excessive darkness of the cavern. Properly carried out, this meditation should suddenly make us aware that we have been ‘sleeping’ in our ordinary waking lives, that there is a form of wakefulness that makes ordinary consciousness seem like a prison, that the ‘liberty’ of our everyday lives is actually a captivity to agreeable illusions that we automatically accept as true without watching how they rise into consciousness, quietly procure our assent, and slip away with their depiction unquestioned. Descartes’ words should tear wounds in the fields of habit, effecting a split in which the mind, used to merely following the lead of the senses, slowly begins to withdraw assent from its effects and watches all that happens as if they were passers by. It divorces mind from its customary marriage to the senses and isolates it by forcing it to doubt all images that

come its way, separating it from the content it is so used to occupying its time with.<sup>6</sup> The mind stops swaying and we enter the abyss behind the eye.

This is a dangerous divide. Descartes describes it as feeling like ‘a sudden fall into very deep water’ (AT VII: 24 Haldane and Ross). The mind feels the uncertainty of existence, flounders in the welter of images pleading for approbation while continually withholding its approval, keeping itself separate but desperate for something to hold onto, something that is not an image, something that cannot be manipulated or deceived. But nothing has been left untouched by doubt, the mind has eliminated from its responsiveness all that exists and has been experienced. The mind watches in the rule of Darkness, still chained in the cave of deception, waiting, attending to the shadows as shadow. Only in this state does it suddenly recognise with immediate clarity the unquestionability of its own pure existence as mind for only now can it see itself as pure mind. Suddenly an intuition flashes that reveals the existence necessary for thought, the empty opening that allows thought to arise, the clearing that thought needs to articulate itself in. It abruptly becomes obvious that no matter *what* the content of the thought is, it needs a subjective freedom to inscribe itself within, a pure mind open to thinking whatever thought arises. The thought needs a background light to be seen, and no matter how radically the thought is exposed to questioning, this backlight always remains the same, for it is what allows the question to arise. Within the silent hour something beyond the shadows has stirred, thinks itself alive. Behind thought lies the existence of pure mind. The meditation allows pure mind to apprehend its own existence as pure mind. This is certain as long as one thinks in this way. It is not the certainty of body or of the senses but a certainty of the soul, the certainty of a pure openness that allows all other subjective ‘certainties’ to arise. Only this is necessarily true of a thinking being, all else rises and falls as various assortments,

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<sup>6</sup> In essence this is the same technique outlined by Pyrrho of Elis and his school of Greek sceptics where the key act of consciousness was to reach a suspension of judgement from which tranquillity followed. We have seen similar descriptions of suspending judgement in Abraham’s sacrifice of his only son, Augustine’s will-less-ness and Dante’s Piccarda.

partially correct, partially uncertain, all else exists as grades of uncertainty within the light that allows these manifestations to take effect. Within the rule of darkness a single light holds attention, a point of clarity shines against the shadows, and it is the certainty of the *Cogito*. The prisoner finds a crux within himself to lever off the chains riveting him towards the cave wall, and begins to turn towards the light...soul finds soul.

This is a very difficult insight to sustain. The immediacy of the state, its 'thatness', does not initially provide guidance to what this self is, and the first temptation is to try and fill this void with some other object, to mistake the emptiness with some kind of description\object\portrayal\content. It is the natural mistake of a being that still sees the concrete world of body and the senses as being more real, certain and obviously true than pure mind. Descartes repeats the whole meditation again, slowly eliminating from our minds the certainty of all bodily remnants until it again becomes obvious that what is most certain about his state of contemplation is the very state of thinking it entails. As he again becomes aware of his thought as pure thought the blinding certainty of his own existence presents itself again – not his existence as body but his pure existence, that which exists to allow thought to arise.

[To] speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks (AT VII: 27 Haldane and Ross).

Yet this elimination of all bodily sensations from the mind is not enough to prevent the mind again slipping back into the images that run across its clearing rather than keeping attention on the clearing itself. The imagination steps in and begins to imagine what this existence could be, running through options and metaphors like wind or fire, vapour or breath, or any other explanation given in the long history of describing what this mind\soul is. Indeed, for most readers following the *Meditations* they have been using the

imagination to imagine a lack of imagination, rather than stilling the images themselves. All of these images replace the I with a '*something*' that has a corporeal residue, precisely what has been questioned and eliminated when certainty of being is reached through pure mind. 'Thus I know for certain that nothing of all that I can understand by means of my imagination belongs to this knowledge which I have of myself, and that it is necessary to recall the mind from this mode of thought with the utmost diligence in order that it may be able to know its own nature with perfect distinctness' (AT VII: 28 Haldane and Ross). The mind must know itself without any residue of body or image, without any content claiming to explain or represent it, the mind must quieten down both sensation and imagination to the point where only pure mind exists. Only now can it ask itself properly 'What then am I', for only now is the mind capable of separating off its own purity from all other contents, only now can the mind enter itself as untainted mind and ask 'What then is a thing which thinks?' The answer is now easy to give and clear—

It is a thing which doubts, understands [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels (AT VII: 28 Haldane and Ross).

It is not the imagination that attempts to grasp what the mind is, but the mind in its own clarity grasping what its various attributes are. It watches itself doubt, understand, affirm and deny, imagine, will and feel, yet now it is not caught in the action of doing these various things. In a state of hyper awareness the mind observes all that happens as a part of itself, recognizing the imagination, senses, will, and feelings existing as elements of its functioning without falling into these various actions and losing itself within them. Now the imagination and the senses can begin to function again, for they operate within the deepest certainty of subjective being, the mind. The mind takes in all that is happening as precisely its own functioning, carefully avoiding the presumption that any of its occupations represent something outside of it, remaining totally focused on watching its own functioning in its own terms – as mind. Only in this state does the mind begin to know itself a little better—

From this time I begin to know what I am with a little more clearness and distinctness than before; but nevertheless it still seems to me, and I cannot prevent myself from thinking, that corporeal things, whose images are framed by thought, which are tested by the senses, are much more distinctly known than that obscure part of me which does not come under the imagination (AT VII: 29–30 Haldane and Ross).

The balance has not yet been reached, judgement still steps in and takes corporeal things to be more certain than that obscure part which thinks, even though it knows that the I that thinks is more indubitable than physical affairs.<sup>7</sup> But at least the mind is now clear on its own inability to maintain this state of certainty. It recognises its love of wandering out of its own field and into the massive outdoors of exteriority. Descartes acknowledges this tendency, and rather than fight against it, he again allows it free reign so that it can once more travel the road from outside to inside, from physical to mental, from concrete to abstract, from losing itself in the world to again finding its own purity. He presents for our meditation a simple piece of the outside world that we quickly judge to be clear, distinct and certain – a piece of wax still fresh from the hive, still carrying the very scent of the flowers it has been drawn from. He deliberately invokes all our senses to the point

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<sup>7</sup> In Stanford's superb Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Newman (99) gives a clear example of how the obviousness of common sense is not as certain as the Cartesian insight by comparing a 1925 essay written by G. E. Moore – *A Defense of Common Sense* – to the *Meditations*:

I begin, then, with my list of truisms, every one of which (in my own opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true. ... There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since ... But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born ....

In contrast, Descartes writes:

[I]f I judge that the earth exists from the fact that I touch it or see it, this very fact undoubtedly gives even greater support for the judgement that my mind exists. For it may perhaps be the case that I judge that I am touching the earth even though the earth does not exist at all; but it cannot be that, when I make this judgement, my mind which is making the judgement does not exist (*Prin.* 1.11, AT 8a: 8–9).

where we can actually imagine this delicious morsel in our hands. He then takes us towards the fire in his room and the honey wax tragically melts before our eyes, becoming so hot that we almost drop it from our sticky hands. All that is most obviously sensual has been richly evoked, yet this honey wax that was so clearly and distinctly honey wax has now changed to our taste, smell, sight, touch and hearing. Yet we still maintain that it is the same piece of honey wax. It cannot be the senses that tell us this, for each of them has gone through massive shifts, something else must have given the wax its distinctness through these mutations. Perhaps it was simply just a body that in the last instance was flexible and moveable beyond all its sensory qualities. Yet even in this abstracting move the temptation is to think that it is the imagination doing this work, that 'flexible' is something round becoming something square. But the imagination cannot imagine an infinitude of change, only specific instances of change. It cannot possibly imagine *all* the changes the wax is capable of, this extends beyond the imagination into the pure abstraction of mind. Only this faculty is able to understand wax in its pure simplicity, for only mind can move beyond the physical changes in wax and the imaginal possibilities to the infinity of shapes the wax can take on. Only the mind is capable of providing the abstract power needed to understand what wax is in its essence, in its nakedness, stripped of all its vestments. Once more we are presented with the certainty of mind and the clarity and distinctness of its working in comparison with that of the senses and the imagination. As we again enter its purity, its existence again becomes most obvious, for no matter what the quality of our experience, its truth or falsity, validity or deception, it is certain that we are aware of its happening to us through the wakefulness of mind. Necessary testimony is given, not to the authenticity of the object, but to the fact of our being aware of it. Suddenly we are not working with the outside world at all but purely with the world as it is given in our mind, not with corporeal things but with what is happening inside our thought and only that. A pure level of interior focus has been reached where the judgement lies suspended, refusing to give certain images more credence than others as all pass by, affirming only that I exist. Only now does it become possible to state:

*I see clearly that there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my mind*  
(AT VII: 34 Haldane and Ross).

This is the state that the reader must strive to attain and sustain before moving on to the third meditation. The clearest separation possible between body and soul, world and thought, matter and mind must be accomplished along with the clarity of recognition it brings to the substance of mind before the meditation can continue. Descartes carefully enacts it out for us so that we can follow in his footsteps—

I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all the images of corporeal things, or at least (for that is hardly possible) I shall esteem them as vain and false; and thus holding converse only with myself and considering my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiar acquaintanceship with myself. I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of many [that loves and hates], that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives; for as I remarked before, although the things which I perceive and imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me and in themselves, I am nevertheless assured that these modes of thought that I call perceptions and imaginations, inasmuch only as they are modes of thought, certainly reside [and are met with] in me (AT VII: 34–35 Haldane and Ross).

It has been Descartes' peculiar genius to guide the reader into a state resembling quiescence of all contents from the mind through the technique of the deceiving demon. Quiescence is an exceptionally difficult state of meditation to sustain. It entails a total quietening down of all representations and affects until only pure mind exists in total being. As Descartes says, this is hardly possible, but an approximate state can be reached via a guided meditation on the evil genius, and now another approximation is going to be attempted – the vision of God. In the paths traced by Plotinus, Augustine, Bernard and Bonaventure, this stilling of the mind was a precondition for seeing The Good, the

Beautiful and the True God, Descartes is going to attempt a similar journey. It is a journey that many critique on the level of reason without attempting to enact the meditation, and as valid as such critique may be, we are focusing in on the states of mind Descartes is trying to take us through. We are working with an *order of meditation*.

### The experience of Pure Being

Resting in a state of interior equanimity, we notice that there is no grounding for the truth of the certainty of pure mind other than its blinding obviousness – the fact that we are in it, that we are it, that this is what most palpably is. It is clearer than the light of day, more distinct than the rules of mathematics.<sup>8</sup> There is no ground to assert its truth, justify its correctness, other than its intuitive nakedness. Whilst in this state one cannot help but assent to its truth. Everything else can be doubted, from earth and sky to arithmetic and geometry, for all can be twisted by the power of a deceiving spirit, but he can never remove the clarity of existence produced by pure mind watching itself think, for the very awareness of thought, no matter how deceptive, means existence. The difficulty is that as soon as we attempt to extend this kind of clarity and distinctness to anything outside our own subjective certainty, it becomes possible for the all powerful evil demon to trick us with these very feeling of clearness and distinctness – as with a mathematical ‘truth’ that might be sustained only by his wilful genius and altered at his whim, leaving us deceived. Nor can we sustain this subjective certainty of the I think/I am. At some stage we have to slip out of this focused awareness back into our everyday reality, back into accepting our representations as correlating to the outside world, and hence back into the ebb and flow

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<sup>8</sup> Descartes defines clarity and distinctness as follows in the *Principles*:

A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be not merely clear but also distinct. I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear (*Prin.* 1.45, AT 8a: 21–22).

of uncertainty, back into the ‘blind impulse’ of accepting our sensory depiction of reality as unproblematic, back into the sway.<sup>9</sup> All we have is the certainty of an unsustainable solipsism and what certainty is that? Even if we try to reason about the subjective certainty of the I think\I am intuition we enter the world of uncertainty again, for the demon can trick us in our reasoning, can make memories and reasons appear clear and distinct which are not necessarily so. Only in the state of pure mind does doubt vanish, but this is both a subjective and transient condition, open to continual disruption – a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs indeed. It is a first principle that vanishes as soon as an attempt is made to build anything upon it, for it is only valid whilst sustaining its state, and as soon as anything else is focused on, it disappears into the possible corruptions of memory and reason. We need a certainty more certain than the *cogito* if any progress is to be made. Yet we cannot step outside of our pure mind in order to find such a certainty, for we are hemmed in on all sides by the evil genius. The only possible route is to keep going inwards, to remain within pure mind and explore what it presents us with, to keep within subjective certainty until it reveals something even more certain within its stillness. A deep and sustained looking inwards becomes necessary. It is a paradoxical

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<sup>9</sup> This description correlates powerfully with that of Plotinus’ account of the ascent and descent into and away from pure subjectivity. See Sara Rapp’s comparison between Plotinus and Descartes in ‘Self knowledge and subjectivity’ in Gerson’s *The Cambridge companion to Plotinus* (1996) 250–253. An excellent poetic account of what Descartes is describing philosophically is found in that master of the soul – Walt Whitman and his poem – ‘A Noiseless Patient Spider’.

A noiseless patient spider,  
 I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
 Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
 It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
 Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.  
 And you O my soul where you stand,  
 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
 Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,  
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul

(Washburn and Major [1998] 726).

enterprise. Subjective certainty has been attained but is not sufficient to build anything upon, yet only by remaining within this pure mind do we have enough protection from the deceiving demon to continue the search for some kind of lasting certainty. Somehow, while remaining within pure mind, we have to find a principle more solid than pure mind; within subjective certainty we have to find something more objectively certain, something that sustains certainty for longer than a pure moment of thought. In the initial dawn of the true we have to disclose the Light. It is this need that drives the third meditation and so we plunge with Descartes into the deeper reaches of the soul.

As we enter and hold a state of pure mind we notice that our thoughts work in specific ways. They tend to combine an image with an action. For example, the image of wax is combined with the action of the mind doing something with it – questioning it, testing it, approving it. In a quiescent state, the mind can watch an image arise inside of it and then notice a specific affection, will or judgement attaching itself to the image and using it in some way. We stay within the safety net of pure mind with the attachments of affection or will to images, for we can still state with certainty that no matter what it is we desire or will that we are certainly in the state of desiring or willing. We watch our desire or will from pure mind. Yet with *judgement* the immediate temptation arises to assert the similarity of the image inside of me to what it represents outside of me and in so doing to step outside the mind into the province of materiality and the dangers of deception. Somehow, the exploration of the mind has to occur without the damaging assertions of the faculty of judgement, an exploration of images must commence without attachment to their supposed exterior realities. The realm of pure ideas must be entered without accessories, and to do this Descartes must again face the common sense judgement that the inside world accurately represents a given world outside of it.

That it is a natural inclination to believe in an outside world is no argument, for natural inclinations often err, hence the vices of humanity. That these ideas are attached to the outside world by the fact that they occur within me with or without my own will, involuntarily (e.g. the idea that wax is hot derives from the wax being hot whether I like

it or not) is no argument for there may be some as yet unknown faculty inside of me that produces the effect. Lastly, the assumption that the idea resembles the object is not even founded on sense experience, as the melting wax example illustrated with its radically shifting modes. All the above leads to a critique of the representational view of ideas resembling an outside world and a further quieting down of the faculty of judgement, allowing the world of pure ideas to rise forth in the mind.

Only now can the mind explore pure images and compare them without blindly judging their validity on the false criterion of material reality. Nor does it remain paralysed within the safely empty equivalence of the cogito watching all thought as a stream passing it by. Certain ideas now seem to represent something more 'substantial' than other ideas, not on the basis of materiality, but on the requirement of *necessity of being*. The radical sameness of the cogito watching itself begins to qualitatively differentiate various images from each other, presenting a spectrum that ranges from ideas of most necessarily being to ideas of contingent being, opening out to depth. This is what happened with Origen's bride, only it was in the different register of love with her cry *Set ye in order Charity in me*. Some ideas are challengeable on their own terms, others are not. Some ideas seem to be more substantial than others, not in the sense of material reality, but in terms of necessary reality in their own right. It is a simple meditation of elimination. The pure mind examines pure ideas and lists them. There are those

which represent me to myself..., there is another which represents a God, and there are others representing corporeal and inanimate things, others angels, others animals, and others again which represent to me men similar to myself (AT VII: 43 Haldane and Ross).

Now it explores the list without the cloud of exterior resemblance interfering and asks itself which of these ideas it is capable of producing itself as a contingent, thinking being, and which ideas it cannot have been the cause of *but still exist within it*. If it finds that all of its possible ideas can be derived from its own status as contingent thinking being, then

there is no possible basis for any certainty other than the Cogito, and it remains on the leaky raft of its own subjective sureness, surrounded by an ocean of doubt. If, however, it finds an idea inside of itself that it is not capable of generating within the conditions of its own mind, then it follows that it is not alone in the world, that another being exists as the cause of the idea, an idea found totally within the subjective world of the cogito. A stepping stone to a world outside of solipsism would suddenly appear from within its own parameters, a stepping stone from the limits of subjective certainty to something beyond itself, a beyond free of the limitations and unfounded assumptions of common sense representations and judgements. The imprisonment of the self within itself will suddenly find something deep within that opens it out into a profounder world of existence. The inside will have found within itself the necessity for an outside.

This is the purest moment of education, a point where the inside opens out to the outside, recognises within itself what is beyond itself. It is the crystal moment of learning, when self opens out radically to that beyond itself. It is in this moment that Cartesian pedagogy fully breaks through, the moment where a pure inside touches a pure outside

Such a release is found in the idea of God. All other ideas can possibly be made up from within the conditions of I think\I am. As a thinking substance it is able to imagine other possible substances of all sorts of varieties. As a singularity that remembers itself enduring, all sorts of extrapolations as to time, space and number can be generated. The whole range of existence, from the most phenomenal to the most abstract can be engendered from the richness of this single intuition. The same cannot be said of the idea of God. The more the pure mind focuses on the idea of an infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all knowing, all powerful Being that has created all that exists, including the very mind thinking the concept, the less does it seem possible that this idea has been generated by the mind alone.

For how would it be possible that I should know that I doubt and desire, that is to say, that something is lacking in me, and that I am not quite perfect, unless I had

within me some idea of a Being more perfect than myself, in comparison with which I should recognise the deficiencies of my nature (AT VII: 46 Haldane and Ross).

The pure idea of an infinitely perfect being must have existed prior to the whole enterprise of the *Meditations*, for a sense of inadequacy has driven the project, and this can only stem from a prior higher standard of perfection, an idea not possible to generate within the limited conditionality of the *Cogito*. The question then naturally arises as to what has placed such an idea of Perfect Being within the list of images contained in a pure mind watching itself think. It cannot be by the *Cogito*, nor by anything else of an imperfect nature, for only something of at least equal perfection to the idea of perfection could have caused it. Furthermore, the idea must have come from outside of me although it is inside of me, for I could not have generated it from my conditionality. It must have come from Perfection itself. Something more perfect than me must have placed the idea of perfection inside of me.

Yet even as such a height is reached, the certainty of its truth trembles and breaks as the meditator falls out of the state of pure mind inquiring into itself. Insight into the necessity of God's being is dependent on pure mind attending to what is inside of it that it, of itself, cannot account for. Even the slightest faltering of focus causes the certainty to evaporate, leaving us once again caught up in the dangers of memory and the fields of materiality. A different start is needed, one that somehow escapes from the contingency of sustaining a state of mind we will inevitably drop out of, one that does not justify God on the basis of a fluctuating condition of awareness.

So this I cries out in frustration 'From whom then do I derive my existence?' It looks at itself as pure mind, recognises the undeniability of its existence and enquires as to where it comes from. It is the most obvious of questions – where does this imperfect being that has an idea of perfect Being inside of it arise. Not a self creation, for then this self would have given to its being all the perfections it so craves from within its imperfect state.

Maybe this I was not created at all, and has always existed? This thought does not alleviate the intensity of the question, only exacerbates it, for now the question becomes ‘what sustains me in this very moment?’ It actually results in a meditation of astounding power. As we interrogate the I think as to what sustains it from moment to moment, we can find no power inside ourselves that ensures its continued existence, its here-ness. It continues to exist, but from no power of its own. We might turn ourselves towards its existence or away from it, no matter, it continues whether we wish it or not, what varies is our awareness of its existence. It arises to consciousness when we attend to it, goes underground when we turn away from it, but it is always there. We are not in control of the centre of our being, its exists by some force outside our control, ‘I depend on some being different to myself’ (AT VII: 50). We do not generate this subjective essence ourselves, we cannot switch it on or off, only attend or turn away. We might switch off our own bodies through suicide, but it is impossible to enter our own minds and switch it off – it is sustained by something else. This being, in order to have given me my existence, must at the very least have the power to give existence to pure thought and the idea of perfection, and must be maintaining such a state within me at this current moment. According to the principle that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect, this being sustaining me must at the very least also be a pure mind with an idea of perfection imbedded in it. We then simply enquire into the cause of this cause. If it is caused by itself, then it must be God, for it possesses the quality of Self-Existence. If it is caused by another cause we pursue the meditation until we reach a final cause that has caused all the others, but is itself causeless, and we reach God. Either way, the fact of our very existence speaks not of itself but of an Existence greater than ours. Slowly but surely we begin to intuit that there is nothing clearer and more distinct in the mind than that which causes it to be, that sustains it, enables it, makes it possible, and places within it the idea of perfection impossible to derive from any other source apart from Perfection itself. We have reached a mark inside of us that points beyond us, our natural light has opened out into a light far greater than itself, and as Descartes reaches this middle point in the *Meditations* (that is also its high point) he stops for a while

in order to contemplate God himself, to ponder at leisure His marvellous attributes, to consider, and admire, and adore, the beauty of this light so resplendent, at least as far as the strength of my mind, which is in some measure dazzled by the sight will allow me to do so (AT VII: 52 Haldane and Ross).

Augustine had described a similar experience in the *Confessions* when he entered the Divine Light and recognised its superiority for ‘it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it...What I saw was Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being (*Conf.* VII,X [16]). Here we hear a similar account, except this time it is built up carefully within an order of reason as well as meditation.<sup>10</sup>

### The Return to the Cave

Descartes has taken the learning soul on a journey into, and beyond, itself.<sup>11</sup> Now what remains is consolidation and elaboration before descending back downward into the cave

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<sup>10</sup> There are a number of comparisons between Descartes and Augustine, but the most thorough and convincing is Stephen Menn’s *Descartes and Augustine* (1998). He clearly shows both the Neo-Platonic and Augustinian influences on Descartes in ways that parallel this chapter. Also see Matthew’s ‘Post Medieval Augustinianism’ in Stump and Kretzmann’s *The Cambridge companion to Augustine* (2001) for a good guide to Augustine’s influence over Descartes, Malebranche, Grotius, Leibniz, Mill, Berkeley, Russell and Wittgenstein.

<sup>11</sup> In a superb article on Descartes and how his own education under the Jesuits informed his writings, Timothy Reiss lucidly describes the ‘passage technique’ of schooling at La Fleche. It was a method of always including and transcending, using the new to critique and replace the old within a better framework, only to then introduce a higher and more inclusive framework that critiqued the critique, moving from grammar to rhetoric, philosophy (logic, natural philosophy and ethics\metaphysics) before reaching The Good and the True. In their second semester of their second year of grammar

pupils studied an immensely popular text, one used everywhere in schools throughout the Renaissance... . Cebes’s *Tabula* offered an allegory of the road to the true and the good... . [I]t described a painting depicting three...enclosures through which humans passed on their way to wisdom... . The first is a character who stands just outside the first gate – Suadela (Deceit) –

of materiality with a new light. Only now can he re-enter the world beyond the subjective certainty of the I think\I am intuition, for only now has he found a principle more lasting, definite, certain, clear and definite than its vacillating predecessor. We have reached the point from which everything suspends, and it is not I think\I am, it is a perfect God. We might have reached God through the I think\I am, but this sequential priority of the I think\I am does not prevent the formal priority of that which created the I think\I am coming First. God takes precedence and becomes the keystone holding all together.<sup>12</sup>

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serving a goblet of varied amounts of error and ignorance to humans as they enter life ('Revising Descartes: on subject and community' in P. Coleman, J. Lewis and J. Kowalik's *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (2000) 22.

If Descartes undertook to doubt everything in his *Meditations* it would seem he had good grounding for some elements of this project in his own schooling. See also Stephen Gaukroger's comprehensive *Descartes: an intellectual biography* (1995) chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of Descartes' schooling and its drenching in Aristotelian texts.

<sup>12</sup> To ensure there is no mistaking how far we have reached, both in the skills of meditation, its specific effects on the mind, and the conclusions derived there from, Descartes gives a lucid summary of the state of affairs at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> meditation. I can do no better than quote him before we proceed further:

I have been well accustomed these past days to detach my mind from my senses, and I have accurately observed that there are very few things that one knows with certainty respecting corporeal objects, that there are many more which are known to us respecting the human mind, and yet more still regarding God himself; so that I shall now without any difficulty abstract my thoughts from the consideration of [sensible or] imaginable objects, and carry them to those which, being withdrawn from all contact with matter, are purely intelligible. And certainly the idea which I possess of the human mind inasmuch as it is a thinking thing, and not extended in length, width and depth, nor participating in anything pertaining to body, is incomparably more distinct than is the idea of any corporeal thing. And when I consider that I doubt, that is to say, that I am an incomplete and dependent being, the idea of a being that is complete and independent, that is of God, presents itself to my mind with so much distinctness and clearness – and from the fact alone that this idea is found in me, or that I who possess this idea exist, I conclude so certainly that God exists, and that my existence depends entirely on him in every moment of my life – that I do not think that the human mind is capable of knowing anything with more evidence and certitude.

This helps the meditator off his doubting raft, for the possible thesis of an all powerful deceiver has now been defeated by an Absolute Perfection that will not maliciously deceive. False signs and symbols of malice evaporate and we lie down like children in this holiness.<sup>13</sup> Yet what is solved in one meditation only opens up new concerns for the next, for now the obvious fact of an error filled existence has to be somehow explained within the confines of a Perfect Creator. If the first three meditations had been filled with the rule of Darkness and its progressive defeat by an ever-expanding tide of light, now it is as if within the expanse of light a small blot of darkness appears that threatens to mar and corrupt the luminosity. It intimidates a reversal, an ever expanding darkness to overwhelm the light. Only by entering into this world of error with the principle of Perfection will this corrupting threat be eliminated.

If Descartes finds within his own mind an idea of Supreme Perfection, then he also discovers within its realm a 'negative idea of nothing' (AT VII: 54 Haldane and Ross). Like Dante stretched between Ulysses and Elijah, or Hamlet caught between Hyperion and a satyr, Descartes feels the massive range that human being extends over, captivated between God and naught, placed between supreme Being and non-being, between All and nothing. The meditation is on how to live between the extremes of Being and nothingness in the tempest between the poles of our condition. In order to enter into such reflection, the first requirement is humility. Having contemplated the glory and perfection of God, the recognition of just how feeble and limited human nature is presents itself with brutal clarity, leaving the meditator exceptionally cautious in attempting to explain the ends of God. The second requirement is an integral vision in which the full magnificence of God's creation in all its complex glory has to be contemplated, where it is recognised that all imperfection fits into a massive picture of full creation, a plenitude that has poured out into all possibilities, creating everything between perfection and nothingness in all its promising variety. Such a consideration increases humility, for humanity is not the end point of creation, nor its only or main focus. We have a place but only as a part of a great

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected poems* (1945) 418.

universe. With these preliminary reflections in place, the meditation proper into the back of beyond can begin.

The pure mind enquires into itself as to the nature of its errors and notices that error arises when two internal faculties combine in a specific manner – the understanding and the will. Either faculty, when used correctly, is without error. Understanding, so long as it apprehends itself without asserting the representational truth of its apprehensions, remains without fault. It is certainly a limited faculty, for human understanding does not know everything possible there is to know (unlike God’s understanding, which knows even of the sparrow falling from the tree). But this limitation does not prevent it from working correctly when used properly within its precincts. Our will, on the other hand, has no such limit, God has given us a will that resembles His Own more than any other faculty we possess. Our free choice is not subject to any limits but our own, it has been given to us in all of its singular perfection and power – how can we have free choice without having it completely? As we meditate within pure mind on our different faculties we find that all of them are limited in comparison to the nature of God, whose Imagination, Comprehension, and Memory far extends our own, yet with free will we find something that is so infinite and perfect as to resemble God within us. We are *free to choose* between denying and affirming what understanding places before us – that is our greatest and most simple faculty. Examined carefully by the pure mind, specific intensities of free will become apparent, ranging from a kind of neutral indifference to a spontaneous acceptance of The Good and the True (AT VII: 57–8), depending on the quality of reason being contemplated. Free will operates at its lowest level when drifting about indifferently between options, unable to decide due to lack of knowledge, like Hobson’s donkey. At its most powerful it surges with recognition or denial, embracing or spurning a specific option as it responds to compelling reasons for or against a state of affairs.

For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgement or choice; in that case, although I should be

wholly free, *it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference* (AT VII: 58 my emphasis).

The more commanding we find the intuition, the freer we are in our embrace of it, until a point is reached where pure determination and freedom meet and coalesce into each other, into one spontaneous affirmation that is totally determined, yet utterly free – as in the intuition of the being of I think and a perfect God and all that can be clearly and distinctly derived from these stellar points. At its best the free will is totally and spontaneously overtaken\dominated\determined by the utter obviousness of the choice to be made, one path presenting itself as good and true, others as false and unpleasant, so that no other way seems possible but the clear and distinct one right in front of our pure minds. It is not a choice between excluding things. It is not a choice between, but of.

Yet as we watch our various faculties function within us, we notice that the scope of the will is far larger than that of the understanding. We only understand a few ideas clearly and distinctly, much else occurs in us that is vague and indefinite, yet the will can range over an infinity of affairs judging aye or nay, indiscriminately affirming and denying what it will, no matter what the state of understanding is. Human error consists primarily in allowing the will free reign in areas of little understanding, in making judgements on areas it does not know enough about, in manufacturing verdicts without enough evidence. This is how error occurs inside a human being even though he has been created by a perfect God, and this is what the first two meditations attempted to gain control over through stilling judgement. We take our two perfectly functioning faculties and misuse them in combination. When used correctly, such as in the intuition of the I think and a perfect God ‘a great light in the intellect’ is followed ‘by a great inclination in the will’ (AT VII: 59) and the will freely and spontaneously embraces the ideas clearly and distinctly presented to it by the understanding. Yet in matters of indifferent support and evidence, the tendency of the human being is still to make judgement calls, often on the scantiest of grounds, rather than refraining from making any judgement until some clarity of mind is reached. God is not responsible for the creation of this error, we are. Our

intellects are limited due to our status as created beings, our wills are infinite given the simplicity of its function – we either have free will or we don't – it is not divisible. There is nothing to fault the Creator with over here, as far as our limited and dependent intellects can ascertain. Error arises in how we use the very gifts we have been given.

The problematic of error within us that arose with the intuition of a Perfect God now has an adequate response, based on an examination of our own interior faculties by pure mind. Yet the discovery of the root of error inside of us has also provided insight into our 'greatest and most important perfection' (AT VII: 62) – the correct use of the faculties, especially that of the intellect and the will. A state of mind that has destroyed its proclivity to judge on areas it has no warrant within, that harnesses infinite will to pure understanding and spontaneously rides the one path that continuously arises as Good and True, that is our quintessential activity in this world. God could have made us more perfect by ensuring that our wills and intellect combined flawlessly all the time, but then the universe would have been the poorer for a lack of the specific type of being we are – strung out between nothingness and perfection, error and truth, tending towards the gaffe yet striving for perfection. Given these conditions, what kind of truth can we reach for, what space of light opens up for us within the greater Light of a God who does not deceive? What is the opening we can work within where intellect and will wheel in unison over an ever enlarging terrain?

The most pressing territory to travel towards is that of material objects, that which has been abandoned since the beginning of the journey inwards and upwards. The meditator now faces this terrain assured of its objective certainty, given a God who does not wilfully deceive. He also has subjective rules of engagement which ensure that truth is reached via the correct use of the faculties of intellect and will. The road ahead might be obscure but we are assured that it is honestly there and that we have the correct tools of navigation. We can now grasp true objects with correct judgement and so must return to the cave. We return down the order of certainty the same way we ascended, and after God and Cogito comes the certainty of mathematics – the *essence* of material objects. Then

comes the certainty of physics – the *existence* of material objects as brought to us by the senses. This will finally lead us into the world of the passions that exist in the twilight zone between existence and nothingness. The destruction of the demon has eliminated the doubt that the obvious truth of mathematics is a trick of deception, but it does little against the nether world of the passions and the senses, which are obscure in their very nature, making it more and more difficult to work clearly and distinctly as we move back downwards and outwards from the mind to the world and the body. So the initially easy descent into the clear and distinct world of mathematics begins to become problematic as we re-enter the physical world. Faculties previously bracketed come back into play like the imagination and the senses.

We will come to this difficult re-entry later, initially the return is clear cut. As we begin the descent down the ladder of Being, we are greeted by the crystal clear and distinct world of mathematics with its ‘own true and immutable natures’ (AT VII: 64) and standing highest within this realm we contemplate the infinite being of God.<sup>14</sup> As our

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<sup>14</sup> It is at this point that Descartes introduces another argument (the infamous Ontological argument) proving God, as if Meditation Three was not enough. Yet the key point is that the other arguments could not rely on the certain world of Mathematics, precisely because the Demon had not been defeated yet. With the world of Mathematical forms secured, Descartes is able to produce an argument for God’s existence that relies on the certainty of a non-deceptive existence. Why does he do this? To firmly entrench in our minds the certainty of God. Furthermore, this ‘argument’ for God is more of an intuition than a formal deduction. Descartes is attempting to point us to the utter obviousness of the necessary existence of a true God, for ‘what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists? (AT VII: 69). Again, in order to reach this intuition, the meditator has to have quietened down the senses that ‘besiege ... thought on every side’ (AT VII: 69). But most importantly of all, within the range of intuitions made of the mathematical type, the clearest and most distinct intuition of all is that of God for only the essence of God necessarily involves existence. At the heart of God lies eternal Being – necessary existence – infinitely extending without cause into the Timeless. This essence of God is of a higher order than that of mathematical objects like a triangle, for triangles do not have to exist as such. We can contemplate their essence without their existence. Hence within the realm of essential objects, God comes first, hence the ontological proof occurring here and nowhere else.

minds contemplate the forms we find ourselves compelled to assent to the various properties that are contained within them whether we have thought of them or not, for once pointed out to us they become clear and distinct. This is the simple and lucid world of the *Rules*. It is a world of infinite, extended possibility made up of myriads of necessary connections that overlap and interplay in the glorious sea of binding and obligatory truths. The primary language of this world is not verbal, it is number. All of this world of possibility could be made real by God, for God is ‘capable of creating everything that I am capable of perceiving in this manner’ (AT VII: 71). Yet this Formal world does not establish the *actual* existence of material things, only their *possibility*, for only in God do essence and existence necessarily coalesce. Furthermore, pure mind has totally separated itself from sensation making it difficult to launch into material existence on its own terms. A descent from pure mind towards sensation will be vital for the project to succeed, and if the first three meditations entailed a quieting of the senses, now these sleeping energies will have to be systematically awakened while the understanding backgrounds itself. The contemplator is going to attempt a re-entering of the Cave and not be blinded by the darkness, attempt to see with clarity and distinctness a world of darkness and shadow. Such an enterprise does not mean that the Cave will suddenly fill with light and all within it illuminate – it is a necessarily dark place. What is needed is a correct seeing of the darkness, not a miss-description of it as light; an accurate description of the shadows as shadows rather than their obliteration by light is what Descartes’ final and most complex meditation is about.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to capture the full splendour of this last meditation in the confines of this chapter. Guérout devoted a whole book to its mechanisms in his breathtakingly profound double volume analysis *Descartes’ philosophy interpreted according to the order of reasons* and I know of no comparable exegesis of Descartes in English. Some of the flavour of his investigation seeps through the whole of this chapter, but the patterns he points to in Descartes are easy to pick up once one has steeped oneself in the Platonic, Neo-Platonic, and Augustinian patterns. Put in another way, I read Guérout with an experience of confirmation, not discovery, although his manner of execution and deep insight is more weighty than this briefer exploration.

The first faculty to be awakened after the proper use of will and intellect is attained is that of the imagination, for it seems to be that part of the mind that uses images of corporeal things to think. To ensure a clear and distinct separation of pure mind from imagination, Descartes introduces a meditation that reveals their difference.

When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me; and this is what I call imagining. But if I want to consider a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand the triangle to be a three sided figure, I do not in the same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me (AT VII: 73).

The peculiar effort of applying the mind's eye to a thought in the mind, of attempting to see the thought, is an act of the imagination. It is not a necessary constituent of mind for we can understand a chiliagon without having to attempt its envisioning, so the question arises of its origin. The act of the imagination seems to be specifically one of attempting to embody a thought, of giving it some kind of concrete image, and if such an impulse is not a necessary constituent of pure mind, perhaps it derives from some kind of concrete body that gives it impetus. Such a thesis is highly likely, but it does not prove that bodies exist, to get to such a conclusion we would have to work with the faculty that engages with the outside world specifically – that of the senses. So it is that Descartes turns his mind towards an exploration of the senses – a mind that has its will under control, a mind that knows itself as thinking being, a mind that knows there is no Demon engaged in deception for there is a true God. The senses will now be explored from a position of strength and clarity.<sup>16</sup> If deception is found, the mind will look at it clearly and distinctly,

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<sup>16</sup> After rehearsing all the arguments against the senses found in the early meditations, minus the Evil Genius, Descartes states

see what it can take from it that is true and leave the rest behind. If Augustine travelled from the senses to the imagination to the intellect and finally into God in his great work *On the Trinity*, Descartes now travels the same route, only backwards as Plato did in the *Republic* with his clear tracing of the steps back into the cave after reaching the Light, back into the genius of the body.

The senses provide ideas to the mind which seem to come from somewhere outside the mind. They speak of an exterior world, and although sensory images might not precisely correspond to corporeal things, they do seem to continuously refer to something independent of the mind, so much so that 'I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things' (AT VII: 79). It follows intuitively that material things exist, just as in the third meditation it intuitively followed that God exists. What now needs to be established is precisely how well we know them.

Everything in material objects that is reducible to Mathematics can be clearly and distinctly understood and falls under the realm of Physics. It is an obvious step for us moderns, what we miss is the radical demolition job this move makes on Aristotelian physics with its various assorted individual species all existing happily in their own firm classifications. All of this is cleared and left is mathematizable matter – a whole universe open to manipulation and investigation under the rule of a radical sameness. A world of material Science opens up subject only to the rules of the clear and distinct ideas – pure mathematics work in geometric space on extended substance. It is a similar world that opened to Socrates as he followed Diotima's path into the sea of Beauty where all

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But now, when I am beginning to achieve a better knowledge of myself and the author of my being, although I do not think I should heedlessly accept everything I seem to have acquired from the senses, *neither do I think that everything should be called into doubt* (AT VII: 78, my emphasis).

The cave and all its obscurities is about to be entered with a clear mind.

suddenly existed within a radical sameness, yet now this insight is going to receive a massive elaboration in the life work of Descartes.

The material world does not only consist of that which can be formalized, there is much else that is rich to explore. If all had to be narrowed down to the Cogito under the rule of radical doubt in the first three meditations, now, under the certainty of God and the correct use of the faculties, the realm of truth widens and expands to include all of nature under its wing, so long as correct judgement is practiced. It is a widening of astounding breadth.

Indeed, there is no doubt that everything that I am taught by nature contains some truth. For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God (AT VII: 80).

Every nook of creation is filled up with the glory of God, nothing left untouched by his creative hand, inversely proportionate to how the first meditations tarred all with the deceptive brush of the evil genius. It provides the learning soul with the encouragement to let go of the separation it so carefully engineered from the senses on its journey inwards\upwards and to embrace the union it so vividly feels with its own body and the material world surrounding it, for everything that exists owes its existence to God. It is an astounding acceptance.

I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but ... am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit (AT VII: 81).

Such a union is clear from how the mind feels pain, hunger or thirst of the body inextricably as a part of itself, rather than as a neutral observer. This recognition of the

intermingling of body and soul expands outwards to the recognition of the importance of the whole exterior world, not just as mathematizable matter, but as that which has a great variety of colours, sounds, tastes and smells... rich and fecund. It is this abundant world that impacts on the 'whole self' (AT VII: 81), body and mind, in various beneficial and damaging ways. Suddenly, the beauty of the world in all its complexity comes pouring out after being hemmed in by the necessity of the ascetic ascent.

Within this heady mix, correct judgement must still be maintained, for there is a difference between what nature teaches us and what we assume nature teaches us when incorrectly combining the infinite will with finite understanding. We must be continuously aware, for example, that the various bodies at the source of sensory perception do not necessarily resemble the images or sensations produced, although there is an undeniable correlation. So, when we feel heat from a fire, we tend to assume that this sense of heat is present in the fire, that the fire contains this sensed heat. We should rather recognise that cause and effect are different – something in the fire produces a feeling of heat in us, but we only know the feeling it causes in us, not what is in the fire causing the sensation.<sup>17</sup> As soon as we make a judgement from sensation about the nature of the world we have overstepped the limits of what sensory perception legitimately tells us, and are misusing the glorious order of nature given to us by God.

Yet if sensory perception does not provide accurate information about the essential nature of the bodies in the outside world, what then is its point, how should it be used correctly? Rather than inform us as to the true essences of material things, sensory perception reacts to this world in terms of what is beneficial and harmful for us, working with pleasure and pain to ensure that our whole self lives in a healthy and satisfying manner. Pain makes us retract, pleasure encourages absorption, both working in tandem. They assist the amalgam of mind and body in its negotiation with the existing world. There are times,

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<sup>17</sup> 'It is not in the premise that reality is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses a dust, a force that traverses a shade' Wallace Stevens (1945) 489.

however, when our senses encourage us to do something that is actually unhealthy for us, as when, in a state of dropsy we feel thirsty, but to drink would be damaging. Our senses occasionally misinform us as to what is wholesome or harmful, and surely this goes against the already established rule of the Perfect God. How is it that the goodness of God does not prevent our 'whole self' from deceiving itself occasionally? It is a key point in the whole meditation, for we have entered the realm of the senses and are now facing directly up to its tendency to deceive when all that has gone before has defeated error and deception with the stable and true light of God and the natural light of the understanding. His answer is deceptively simple – the senses do occasionally err, but mostly they work towards the good of the self. The nature of their error is a side effect of a beneficial and healthy system, of God lighted limbs. Mind and body are totally different substances – mind is indivisible, body is divisible – but they interact and work together in the wonderful creation of human being. Their point of intersection is a quick and clean interface between a stimulus in the brain and the response of the mind. The mind does not watch a stimulus in the foot run up the spinal cord towards the brain, nor does it observe the brain stimulus as separate from itself, rather it immediately reacts to the stimulus of the body as given in the brain. A mind\body system that was totally conscious of all the messages running through the body would be a noisy place to live within, and the quick responses necessary for healthy living in a real world would be swallowed up in the din of messages preventing immediate action. If our foot is being burnt by a fire, we do not survey the sense of pain travelling up our bodies towards the brain, then watch our brain produce various signals towards the mind, informing it of the event, and then send the response back down the body of 'get the foot out of the fire'. Our awareness cuts out all the relay messages and simplifies it to the sensation of a foot burning and the immediate response of the mind to this one simple message. It is a system specifically designed for the continued health of the whole self, simplifying down the various interactions between body and mind to those that count for our well being as 'soulswool'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mahon calls the insight into this whole self as a 'tolerable wisdom'. As he puts it in a poem of the same title:

It is precisely the healthy functioning of this quick noose called finite human being that occasionally produces error. The immediate message of brain to mind without the rigmarole of tracing the various paths and translations means that sporadic errors can occur because the route of the message is not contained in awareness, only the final impulse. If our brains are stimulated in a certain way, a mistaken feeling of pain can be generated in our feet, even though there is no outside cause of pain, or when we have no feet, as with ghost limbs. Yet these exceptional errors are merely a natural side effect of our God written limbs, of the need of the whole self to function in a quick-thinking and sharp-witted manner. It allows Descartes to reach a point where he can appreciate the immense goodness of God to have provided the mind/body amalgam with such a healthful arrangement and at the same time grasp the causes of error within the system.

This consideration is of the greatest help to me, not only for noticing all the errors to which my nature is liable, but also for enabling me to correct or avoid them without difficulty. For I know that in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not. Also, I can almost always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing; and in addition, I can use both my memory, which connects present experiences with preceding ones, and my intellect, which has by now *examined all the causes of error* (AT VII: 89 my emphasis).

Only now can the meditator turn around and look back on the many doubts that assailed him, *and laugh*. We return to a plain sense of things. With the illuminating certainty of a faultless God of immense goodness guiding a pure mind that works intelligently with its

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You keep the cold from the body, the cold from the mind.  
 Heartscloth, soulswool, without you there would be  
 Short shrift for the pale beast in a winter's wind,  
 Too swift exposure by too harsh a sea.

(*Collected poems* [2000] 14)

faculties of will, imagination and sense perception within an extended body in such a way that the whole self lives healthily, the cave has successfully been entered and the meditator can get on with the business of life as a whole person living in a real world. After learning *how to live in his self*, he can drop the isolation of himself within a room, let go of the interior journey, discontinue the solitary quest, and confidently engage with the meat of our existence, begin to build up a mathematics, a geometry, a physics, a medicine, a morality, for the whole wide world has opened for exploration.

### Closing

The third meditation ended with a hymn towards the Creator as the highest point was reached, now as the most error ridden element of sense perception is shown to contain proof of the goodness and perfection of God, a humbleness foregrounds itself within the depth of the descent into materiality and Descartes ends one of the greatest Meditations in the history of Literature with a simple

[W]e must acknowledge the weakness of our nature (AT VII: 90)

The learning soul returns from the journey into itself more clear and distinct while material existence opens itself out to exploration cleaned of past metaphysic, and the whole self lives within these substances healthily and happily, forging ahead to make the most of this gift called existence, walking between shadow and shadow in a tide of sunlight. Yes.

## Chapter 12: Conclusion

*Well. Son, I'll tell you:  
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
 Its had tacks in it,  
 And splinters,  
 And boards torn up,  
 And places with no carpet on the floor—  
 Bare.  
 But all the time  
 I'se been a-climbin on,  
 And reachin' landin's  
 And turnin' corners,  
 And sometimes goin' in the dark  
 Where there ain't been no light.  
 So boy, don't you turn back.  
 Don't you set down on the steps  
 'Cause you find it's kinder hard.  
 Don't you fall now—  
 For I'se still goin', honey,  
 I'se still climbin',  
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

(Langston Hughes : 'Mother to Son' in Washburn and Major [1998] 1201)

As we stand back and look at the various journeys of the learning soul described in this thesis, certain family resemblances present themselves. In all the stories there is a *terrain* that is covered via specific *paths* by a *traveller* using particular *modes* of travel. If we place the stories one on top of the other a map begins to emerge of all four dimensions. This conclusion will attempt to describe what the general landscape looks like, what the various paths are through this landscape, what kinds of travellers undertake the journey

and what modes are used, with the specific intention of exploring the *pedagogic significance* of such an undertaking.

There were various topographies presented in the stories through which the learning soul travelled. We have Diotima's description of a Ladder of Beauty; Socrates' account of a cave and the world outside it; Abram travelling from Egypt to Canaan, Chaldea, Haran and the Wilderness; the bride leaving her house and going beyond the walls of the city to the outwork; the journey of the alone through the Hypostases to the Alone; Augustine travelling from classical Rome into the Trinity; Abelard wandering around France using his intellect as a weapon in his meeting with Heloise and Bernard; Dante entering Hell, Purgatory and Heaven in the name of his Beloved; Tarquin fleeing the rape of pure love and being torn apart before finally finding himself transformed in the arms of Venus and flying off to Paphos; and Descartes' cogito travelling a world stretched between an evil demon and a Good God before entering the cave of the body with its passions and a world capable of being understood through reason.

A very loose sketch of the various paths within the terrain of the spectrum of the great chain would go as follows. Both of Plato's images (the Ladder of Beauty and the Cave Metaphor) begin at the bottom and work their way upwards to the highest point before returning to the everyday with *insight*. Diotima begins with the love of one body and moves upwards to the pure intuition of the Form of Love without image. Then Socrates demonstrates in his pedagogic relationship to Alcibiades how this insight translates into experience as one returns to the everyday world. Plato's prisoners begin chained to the shadows of desire and move upwards towards an indescribable experience of The Good, before returning to the cave to practice their wisdom as philosopher kings. Yet both of these stories are embedded within everyday discussion about the nature of love and justice from the beginning, creating a fertile mix between ascent and engagement. Philo begins his story half way through as it were, with Abram already on the road to Wisdom, but with Sarai 'unable' to give birth. Initially he must plunge downwards into Hagar before lifting upwards to Sarah, the vision of God and the birth of Isaac. Yet he too must

be prepared to sacrifice these heights reached in order to live freely and without attachment to anything, even the most profound insight. Origen's love story begins with a bride already prepared for the Highest Learning, and narrates the coming and going of this experience until it stabilizes in total union. It is framed by the great falling away from the Father and the constructivist return to his Bosom, a tale from One to One, with a focusing on the later stages of return in a love song. Plotinus' structure is very similar, he writes for those souls prepared for the highest learning, focusing in on these final stages within a backdrop of the pouring out of the One into emptiness and the great return of the alone to the Alone, with each of his lessons containing the whole in its particularity. Augustine begins his *Confessions* from the position of already being enlightened, much as Plotinus does. From this height he describes how he rose from the most superficial and sinful images of the Trinity into a pure image of the Divine. Effectively he begins in the heights and ends there as well, but by the time we have walked the road with him, the infinity of the Trinity has opened out an image within. With the tale of Abelard, Heloise and Bernard, the spectrum breaks apart into components intolerant of each other, awaiting resolution only in destruction and death. Dante begins in the middle with an unsuccessful attempt to reach the heights and has to descend into the deepest dark before slowly rising through Purgatory into the Lightest of Heavens, ending in union with God, yet his whole poem is saturated with the everyday – character after character, critique after critique, prophesy after prophesy, vision after vision are built out of Dante's everyday world. With Shakespeare we have tale after tale that begins with innocent love and breaks into madness, rape, murder, and destruction, yet slowly within his writing an explicitly transcendent dimension emerges before finally taking hold and dominating all before it. With Shakespeare, all is written in beauty, the darkest characters carry a negative sublime, much like Dante, except without a telos that guarantees the victory of Good. This only emerges after extended suffering and takes the full corpus of his work to work its uncertain effect. Finally, Descartes also begins in the middle of his life, opening himself out in a small coal stove room and undertaking a journey inwards and downwards into extreme scepticism and then upwards into God only to return to an everyday world now built up out of reasoned clarity and distinctness.

The 'characters' who undertake the journey through the terrain of Being also have highly particular traits that shift as the pedagogy bites: We have the snub nosed Socrates, young and fanciful, old and wise; Abram the learner unable to give birth to wisdom, then visited by God, then suffering the greatest of sacrifices; the dark and beautiful bride full of loving desire and gentle fear, missing and then finding her Lover, wounded in love; the austere quiet alone fully engaged in the highest paths possible to the Alone; the lust filled and weak willed Augustine broken by a descent of Grace; the proudly intellectual Abelard, the most unique one in love, Heloise, and the most passionate of God's lovers – Bernard; the proud and lust filled Dante the wayfarer on a brave mission to find true Love again, even if it means Hell; the young puritan – Adonis – rejecting the fullness of Love, the evil Tarquin bent on raping Purity, the magical Prospero holding all the forces within as he attempts to ground love; the playfully wise Rosalind able to guide love into realization; the purposeful and reasoned Descartes deliberately removing himself from all materiality. These are all unique characters in their own right who stretch between total absorption in flesh to oblivion in spirit in very different ways, creating an almost Shakespearean mix of personalities. These characters also use various modes of travel on their assorted paths through the great chain. Some use Intellect, others the Heart, the Will, Action or the Imagination, often combined with each other in assorted ways. What I would like to do now is place all these tales together and try to produce a synthetic map of the whole endeavour that is useful to the educator.

All the stories contain accounts of shifts in levels of consciousness that range basically from immersion in the senses to clarity of reason and then entry into a spiritual dimension, paralleling the great chain of being's image of the human stretched between matter and divinity. How we construct and divide this overall spectrum up varies from story to story, but certain clear patterns emerge as we place these various accounts together. Ken Wilber attempted a similar approach in his own work, except he used over one hundred models of levels of consciousness drawn from ancient, medieval and modern sources across the world (Wilber [2000]). So I will use his categorizations to help

place my more limited study. His work is based on the conviction that underlying the surface variations of cultural difference there are various human capacities that are universal. Using the research of cross cultural psychology an attempt is made to gain a comprehensive overview of human development. The various descriptions within the traditions of what this terrain is and how it is traversed are compared and analysed to produce an integral map of what the full spectrum of consciousness looks like. These claims are then tested and verified by research communities interested in this area (Wilber [1998]) so that a modern and reliable picture can be built up for modern practitioners. Crucially, a person does not just move through the spectrum of consciousness in a one-dimensional manner. Each individual has many different capacities and multiple intelligences that work through the spectrum at different rates. One learner may have heightened cognitive abilities and travel the whole spectrum with his intellect while his moral development remains behind (as we saw with Abelard). The point is that each individual is made up of partly independent modules that develop at different rates – cognition, morals, emotions, will, imagination, memory all develop as we mature but are not necessarily directly tied to each other (Wilber [1997, 2000]). Different individuals prefer different modes of learning, some the path of intellect, others that of emotion, the will, the imagination, practical action and various combination between etc. *The educational finesse consists not only in understanding the depths and heights of human development, but reaching a working knowledge of the various modes of learning used within and being open to it, even if it is not one's own.*

This thesis both points to this practice and embodies it within its structure. The modes of Philo's Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were different, although they worked in the same terrain – Abraham used his mind, Isaac intuition and Jacob action to reach the same end. Plato understood the same problem, hence the varying paths of the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, although both exist within the same terrain that begins with body and ends in The Forms of Beauty, Truth and The Good. To utilize the stories told in this thesis pedagogically would consist in using them as re-sources to work with various students in differing ways. The intellectual, the loving, the volitional, the imaginative, the aesthetic,

the practical – they all need different paths and encouragements within the great spectrum of human development. It is a difficult practice. Not only is there a need for insight into the depths and heights of human learning, there is also the necessity of being able to respond differently depending on where the student is. These stories reveal how our own past partly dealt with these key issues, providing us with a counter-narrative to current educational practices that enables us to see our modernity with new eyes.

Let us begin in a place of fixation and repetition, where the learning soul is caught in the tyranny of unnecessary appetites, bound in chains, addicted to shadows, frozen in fixation, replication and duplication. This is where the bound prisoners of Plato's cave exist as well as the poor souls of Dante's *Inferno*, where Shakespeare helplessly entered with his black mistress. It is Philo and Augustine's Egypt, the place of Eliphaz, of dispersion and scattering in the dark stream.<sup>1</sup> It is a place dominated by the senses, by perceptual thought, by the visible, immersed to the pink in the material of desire and the sins of the flesh, bent on possession, objectification, and domination. A curious feature of the various depictions of this section of the terrain is that it is still held to be an image of the divine, no matter how distorted. Plato's shadows are images of models of the Forms themselves, Augustine's world of stolen pears and fornication exist in the rough image of love, Dante's *Inferno* contains images of The Good twisted out of shape, Shakespeare finds love even in the most humiliated prostitution of himself to Dark Lust. The terrain is shot through with Love from beginning to end, what varies is the purity, clarity and freedom of its force. In the jealous and repetitive rant of a lover lies a heart in love. Yet to get caught in this world as the only world is where the danger lies according to the stories, for love, mind, will, imagination and action increasingly flow more freely as they transcend this sphere. The difficulty lies in how the transcendence is achieved and what the cost of the clear stream is.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Marais' phrase in his great poem on addiction. He felt he was one of the prisoners trapped in the shadows. See Rousseau (1982) 386–396 for an astonishing capturing of the consequences of genius being caught in the tyranny of addiction.

The most obvious danger lies in a repression and denial of this sphere rather than an including and transcending of its forces. This hazard is difficult to negotiate when the entry into the higher terrains presuppose the quieting down of the senses, the very senses that will be celebrated on the journey back from the Divine as an integral part of superabundant creativity.<sup>2</sup> So it is crucial to note three different ways the stories enter this physical realm. The first is to describe a *pathological* descent down into its depths, caught in its power, trapped in its logics, drowned by its command, unable to turn around. This Plato does in his account of the disintegration of the state of the soul from philosopher king to tyrant, Philo in his analysis of the wives and concubines of Nahor and Eliphaz, Dante in the increasing evil of his Inferno, and Shakespeare in the descent of his poet into the foul pits of dark lust. A second way is to provide an account of how this realm is *transcended* by an education of the learning soul. Plato's leaving of the cave and ascent of the Ladder of Beauty; Abram's travels into Sarah and the bright Wilderness after union with Hagar; Origen's shift from union with flesh to that of spirit and God; Plotinus' journey from Nature to the One; Augustine's autobiographical account of his travels from fornication into the Trinity; Bernard's shift from a kiss of the feet through to a kiss of the mouth; Dante's Purgatory; Shakespeare's transformation of Adonis into a flower; and Descartes' silencing meditations reaching from the I to God – these are all examples. The third possibility is to give an account of the material world after reaching abstract heights and then *returning* to its fields, as Socrates demonstrates in his relationship with Alcibiades, as the Philosopher King shows in his return to the cave, as Augustine reveals in his return to his own life as an image of the Trinity, as Dante the Poet reveals in his construction of Dante the Wayfarer, as Shakespeare's Prospero grounds true love, as Descartes returns to the material world after the meditations. These are three completely differing registers, and to get them mixed up results in confusions of

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<sup>2</sup> Us moderns tend to feel that we understand the nature of unconscious repression far better after Freud undertook a journey into his own seething dream world just over a hundred years ago. The key difference between Freud and these tales of the journey downwards, is that they also have an account of love undistorted, of pure love, which ironically for Freud is lust sublimated and twisted into a super ego form.

dangerous proportions: to celebrate dark fixations as the divinity of the flesh; to repress all goodness within the physical permanently as sin; to not return to the everyday and remain isolated in the interior castle; to dualistically separate flesh and spirit permanently; these are some of the mistakes made in conflation. So depending on which register is used this world can either be a hell of repetitive suffering, a purgatory of denial and purification, or a celebration of its many exquisite fruits in a pure freedom. As is mostly the case, of course, it is a mixture of all three. The pedagogical art lies in working with these energies sensitively and intelligently.

The first register undertakes an *analysis of pathology*, and I will use the work of Plato, Abelard, Dante and Shakespeare to elaborate on its use for the learning soul. It is a key dimension – to descend *down* the visionary ladder, away from an integral oneness into a world where the subject increasingly becomes fixated as an object. In Plato's account the descent into a tyranny of desire begins with the intellect ignoring the demands of the appetites, desires and emotions in order to keep itself clear and pure, resulting in an increasing insurrection of the senses until they completely take over in a democracy of desire, finally ending in one desire totally dominating the whole human with its demands and rules. With Dante we have an analysis of increasing pathology, beginning with the easy excesses of the body in knowledge, lust, gluttony, greed and anger, before entering the more vicious and violent city of Dis where all are dominated by self interest and pride, burning in their egos, then plunging even deeper into the lies and deception of Malebolge and finally crossing the threshold into the treachery of Cocytus. All are stuck within repetition in the Inferno, crying out 'I was', duplicating their desire over and over again, unable to break out of the hell that is their own wish fulfilment. Shakespeare clearly reveals the beginnings of pathology in the split Adonis inflicts on Venus, cutting her into whorish lust and virginal love, resulting in a plunge downwards into rape, murder and tyranny fully explored in the great tragedies. With Abelard and Heloise we see the effect of this pathology on the relationship between teacher and student. Unlike Socrates who works cleanly with Love and Knowledge in his relationship with Alcibiades, we see in Abelard an abuse of knowledge and love to defend his self, to destroy others, betray

Heloise and force her life into an unwished for path. These are registers of pathology, of undertaking the exploration of the twisting of the human into oppression and sin because of repression, pride and lust. It is a necessary analysis for it results in a clear seeing of what this realm effects, but one that must be supplemented both by paths away from fixation and accounts of what this world is like without fixation.

So we move to the recognition of another register, a path that travels upwards rather than downwards, that can begin in the most warped of human forests and slowly travel into freedom, we enter the place where the education of the learning soul begins to work its *purificatory* effect. There are various ways to travel from the captivated senses of Egypt into liberation, but at the risk of oversimplification we can point to similarities between the various journeys upwards. The first point is that the journey is from distortion to clarity, from twisted to straight, from fixated repetition to freedom. With Freud and other Hermeneuts of Suspicion (Ricoeur [1970]) we have got used to viewing the trip upwards towards The Good, the Beautiful, and the True in terms of the sublimation of a primal energy, as a twisting of the compulsion into controlled forms – Love is proscribed Lust, Art is transformed Desire, all ride the Will to Power. Yet most of the stories view the process differently. It is pure Love that is distorted in lust, pure Beauty that provides the standard to work with desire, pure Goodness that is misshapen by the Drives. In these stories we work upwards towards an already existing pure Ideal that has been distorted within ourselves rather than beginning with a primal energy that has to be bent into controllable forms. Nietzsche's question was how to turn an animal into a man and then a superman (Nietzsche [1956]), before him the question was how to restore goodness, beauty and truth to those who had fallen away from it. Educators such as Plato, Philo, Origen, Augustine and Dante have seen the Light, experienced its widening, and they write from this place beyond place to those still caught in the sprain.

This results in a second difference – the trip upwards in the various stories consists of a burning away, of a simplification, rather than continual add-ons and complexification. As the higher levels are reached there is a quieting down to silence rather than increasing

elaboration, a concentration on subtraction rather than addition, on elimination rather than accumulation. All the stories told in this thesis work towards a logic of humility, of purifying oneself into a virginal status, of becoming empty so that one can become full. It is a difficult process as can be seen by Plato's curriculum, Abram's years in Chaldea, Augustine's 'not yet', Dante's Purgatory, Shakespeare's suffering, and Descartes' demon, but all address the same quiescence.

The key to this education in simplicity arrives with the turn inwards, when the learning soul stops pouring itself into the outward dance and looks to that still point within. Plotinus, Augustine, Eckhart and Descartes describe this process carefully in differing registers, but we see its effect in Plato, Philo, Origen, Bernard, Dante and Shakespeare as well. It only happens after a primary education gains control of the senses and produces an upright and decent human being – after music and gymnastics; after the encyclica of Hagar; after Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; after honours, money, marriage; after Purgatory; after the rape of the soul by the senses finally loses its energy in exhaustion; after the doubting demon has taken hold. All the stories describe a primary education that leads up to the crucial moment where the learning soul turns inwards to its own citadel and enters its own interior *palace*. These initial pedagogies differ due to a responsiveness to local time, place and character, but they are directed at a similar outcome – the facilitation of an entry into oneself, a stepping into soul after quieting the senses. The genius of these stories exists in the sustained manner they explore the depths of height in this inner abyss, of how they provide tools to explore such an insubstantial world, and of how they fore-structure our own entry. Diotima encourages the learning soul to shift from body to soul, from concrete to abstract until the soul catches fire within as it touches pure Beauty; Abraham turns from Hagar to Sarah; the bride from the world to her Bridegroom; the alone from nature to the One; Augustine from the trinity without to the trinity within; Bernard from the feet to the mouth; Dante from his physical Beatrice to the Pure Love pouring out of her; Shakespeare does it in soliloquy after astonishing soliloquy; Descartes in his coal room entering the vortex of doubt.

If we stand back from all these descriptions we notice certain similarities between them, both in the nature of the levels of interior height and the techniques used to reach them within. It is a simple enough move to understand but one very difficult to educate towards. It involves techniques of increasing quietness and abstraction within an interior world. Initially, once the untwisting has been effected, we would walk with Dante in a pure world at the summit of Purgatory, or experience with Augustine how beauty blooms on existence, with Origen a union with the world, with Plotinus a breaking into the beautiful expanse, with Shakespeare the festival of the flower maidens. We would enter the natural world washed clean of our own distorted image. Then as the world of our ever quieting interior was explored, we would move from union with nature into the basic Forms behind it. Here the spiritual senses of Origen fully come into play and the Bridegroom enters, here the interior world of Descartes begins to differentiate different necessities of being within itself, here Abraham in the desert is able to see the three visitors, here Augustine begins to work with the pure image of the Trinity within his-self, here Dante meets with the subtle forms of Paradise, here Shakespeare experiences the Form of Love in his *Sonnets*, and Prospero works with Ariel. Yet even here there is still room for more quietness, for further abstraction. Just as Dante had to let go of Beatrice – the purest form of Beauty and Love – in Paradise; and Abraham had to sacrifice his pure and only son; so too the Forms have to be let go off in a quietness and abstraction that enters the Formless, the One of Plotinus, the Godhead of Eckhart, where what is experienced is Being without Form, Pure Existence without image, God before the Logos, pure emptiness in the fullness of Being. It is here that image fails and so too language, here what happens can only be spoken of after, and then with difficulty for all objects have vanished into a radical cessation that is Pure Being. Here the great traditions refuse to name, refuse to image, and stand silent – they can only point or show not say or state. It is the point at which Dante's *Comedy* ends, where Plato admits he has composed no work in regard to it, where Plotinus becomes Love, where Augustine sees through a mirror in an enigma, where Eckhart becomes a virgin along with his female mentors.

Here it is better to be than to define what it is to be, a truism throughout the journey but at its purest at this point.<sup>3</sup>

If this supreme point of emptiness, purity, quiescence is sustained, then one opens to the dance from the still point, a non-dual embrace of what Is occurs, one shifts from virgin to wife. It cannot be any other way, for as a pure opening to Being, it exists as you for you are nothing but the opening, nothing but the lighting of Being, as emptiness you are full, as negative you receive the positive, idealism meets realism, Parmenides meets Heraclitus. From here creation pours – Shakespeare, Dante, Augustine, Plato write out of

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<sup>3</sup> This descriptions parallels that pointed to by various modern studies on the subject of higher consciousness (Wilber [2000]). Ken Wilber's model currently holds the field with its limpid clarity and astonishing breadth. He suggests there are at least four higher or transpersonal states of consciousness: psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual. The psychic state is a type of nature mysticism where individuals report a phenomenological experience of being one with the entire natural-sensory world, some examples being Thoreau or Whitman. He calls it psychic, not because paranormal events occur, but because it seems to be increasingly understood that what appeared to be a merely physical world is actually a psychophysical world, with noetic capacities being an intrinsic part of the fabric of the universe, and this often results in an actual phenomenological experience of oneness with the natural world. This is well described by Matthew Fox, for instance, in his brilliant *Toward a transpersonal ecology : developing new foundations for environmentalism* (1990). Wilber then describes a kind of deity mysticism or a subtle state where individuals report an experience of being one with the *source* or *ground* of the sensory-natural world, like St. Teresa of Avila or Hildegard of Bingen. Here there is an experience of the subtle Forms at the heart of existence. Wilber then moves on to describe a type of formless mysticism where individuals experience cessation, or immersion in unmanifest, formless consciousness, described by *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Patanjali, and pseudo-Dionysus among others. Finally, Wilber describes a fourth stage of integral or non dual mysticism where Emptiness and Form meet, where the manifest and unmanifest world unite. Examples of such union are given by Lady Tsogyal, Sri Ramana Maharshi, or Hui Neng. An excellent modern account is found in Loy's influential *Non-duality* (1988). I have preferred to give a descriptive account of various journeys using their own terms rather than replacing them with a modern exemplar, such as Wilber's, but his work, especially *Sex, ecology, spirituality* (1995), has richly informed my own.

life, all falls within their embrace in beauty, nothing is untouched as they enter the cave, all becomes green. The earth becomes a child who knows poems.<sup>4</sup>

We now come into the third register of the senses, not of its warp or straightening but of its *purity*, of how it tastes and feels in clarity. Here a 'vivid transparence' holds that is washed clean of previous expectations. A 'living changingness' is experienced where each moment holds its own 'crystallization of freshness'.<sup>5</sup> The senses exist in Spring. It is the paradise on top of Purgatory for Dante, the flower festivals of Shakespeare, the taste of the world after conversion for Augustine. The objective world becomes impregnated with Presence in a Song of songs, restored in beauty. Yet clearly seen along with this wholesomeness of music and dance is how it can be distorted and then also how it can be up-righted. It is not that a person who re-enters the cave sees all as light and goodness through a rose tinted lens – precisely having experienced clarity and distinctness enables a recognition of its others. Hence Dante speaks with a prophetic and critical voice against corrupt church and state, against the proud intellectual and indulgent poet, for he sees with clarity all three paths – distortion, purification and untainted functioning. Beatrice's last words are of radical critique, not of divine formulas. Within the sea of beauty discriminating guidelines arise, within the simplicity of love, orders of charity unfold, with in the play of Shakespeare all variety meet. So it is that the journey upwards into pure light allows the student to become a teacher of the spectrum in all its critical glory and to embrace its complexity completely.

Yet the pathing within this terrain are many and complex – one only has to experience Shakespeare to be aware of that. He pours out of any attempted classification, drops all previous paths before him. There is no clear beginning in the shadows and an ascent to the light. It always was already all of that and more, and less, in his collected Work. Against the backdrop of the spectrum so clearly sketched and experienced by Plotinus,

<sup>4</sup> Phrase taken from Rilke's poem 'Spring has returned' in Washburn and Major (1998) 900.

<sup>5</sup> Phrases from Wallace Stevens' 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' in his *Collected poems* (1945).

Augustine and Dante, Shakespeare roams and roars, caught in it and clear seeing in it like no other. His strength in the face of the Great Tradition, to make it his own, to walk through it in ways that are still unequalled, open us out to its shimmering complexity. As I move on in this conclusion to sketch out the intellectual, emotional, volitional and imaginative paths through the great chain, it is salutary to bear in mind Shakespeare's ability to walk his own path within these options. Yet in the end all the paths through the spectrum of learning have to be recognised for what they are – guiding maps that must be used and held lightly when entering the actual terrain – otherwise they can become dominating and imperious unities that artificially impose order on that which just is. Eventually we have to leave our Virgils and Beatrices behind and walk the path always presenting itself.

The intellectual path is sketched out in differing ways by the *Republic*, *On the Migration of Abraham*, *The Enneads*, *Confessions*, and the *Meditations* of Descartes. For Plato the use of mathematics and dialectic results in an increasing shift away from perceptual thought and folk wisdom. The initial mastery of abstraction through mathematics opens up all things to measurement within a sea of the conceptual. Superficial appearances and taken for granted statements surrender to a deeper uniformity that sees into the structuring principles providing The Order of Things. More and more of the world is included within ever simplifying principles. From this integral vision the purest part of the mind then reaches out for the purest part of reality in a dialectic which searches the entirely abstract for its assumptions, pushing into a sudden intuitive grasp of The Good. This is what Descartes describes when entering his own mind after eliminating the perceptible through the device of the doubting demon. Firstly the complexity of the world suddenly opens out to radically simple abstractions, secondly, this process leads to an intuitive insight into the obviousness of God – not as a founding assumption *but as that which makes founding an assumption possible*. From here Descartes is able to build up his Cartesian science and philosophy as he leaves the coal room for the glorious outdoors.

In the work of the *Symposium*, commentaries on the *Song of Songs* by Origen and Bernard, the love letters of Heloise, Dante's outpouring to Beatrice, and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *Plays* we see a focusing in on the emotional education of the learning soul. It is an education of the heart. In many ways it is artificial to separate the two. For example, in the intellectual journey of the alone to the Alone in Plotinus, its most vital phase is an uplifting in a wave of love. Yet it is undoubtedly the case that certain learners prefer a more affective mode than the dangerously cold intellectual path. Here the love poetry of the *Song of Songs* and its secularisation in Dante and Shakespeare are of great use. Origen follows the same route as the intellectual path with a different mode of transport. His bride also has an education in the control of the senses and an entry into an interior world with her house stilled. *Proverbs* educate in the correct control of the senses, *Ecclesiastes* in the radical elimination of attachment to the outside world so that she can know herself through an interior examination of her motives and essence. This allows for a permeation in Love with the spiritual senses opening out into *ekstasis* that finally lifts on a wave of love into the Father. But as Aquinas sang the praises of the Franciscans, and Bonaventura the honour of the Dominicans, so too must the learning soul work with these paths, open to both even though emphasis differs.

With Dante and especially Shakespeare however, the clear path is not followed, the affective stream is allowed to pour out in all its fervour. Dante quickly rectifies this and follows the traditional path from the physical to the immaterial (although he provides his own unique imprint), but Shakespeare refuses to direct the outflow and embraces the consequences, much as the great Heloise did. Both welcome the tragedy and romance of deeply loving one person. It results in the experiencing of the whole spectrum within the particular and as such most closely catches the profundity of what it is to live in the everyday with insight into its depths and heights. Yet curiously, such an immanent position often results in a jagged following of the transcendent path within its own terms, as we saw with the trail left by Shakespeare's plays as a whole. Here a profoundness creeps in to the various journeys – embrace the particular in all its immanent complexity

and a transcendent path often slowly opens out within: embrace the transcendent in all its abstract simplicity and an immanent path of creative beauty presents itself in its ending.

The education of the Will is illuminatingly demonstrated by Augustine, although we also see its appearance in Philo, Abelard, Dante, *William Shakespeare* and Descartes.

Augustine captures the difficulty of one who understands the path and affectively longs for it but is unable to will his-self into it. He describes the struggle of willing the will to will, of the failure of will even as one attempts to will it. It was something that Socrates in particular found hard to accept – if it was clearly and distinctly good then it should be accepted and carried out with ease. But Augustine plainly understood the very human experience of knowing that it is good, of wanting to do it, and still not acting on it. In describing his own experience of overcoming this peculiar difficulty, he opened out for clear analysis the education of the Will for the learning soul. The key process was to enter a will-less state that allowed God's will to take over, as Abraham did with Isaac, and as Piccarda pointed out to Dante and as Descartes effects with his evil genius. Yet Augustine's experience crucially spoke to the difficulty of the learning soul reaching such super human heights, of the need for descending Grace to intervene in a learning curve that a human could never achieve on his own. But this descent that he describes and builds into a massive theology is not missing in classical and renaissance texts. Philo's wilderness and his will-less-ness in sacrificing Isaac, Plotinus' descent of an uplifting wave of Love to one in silent waiting, Leontes suddenly finding his own dead Hermione awakening, are other registers of what Augustine experienced as the descent of Grace. Yet it is in Augustine that we find the will carefully integrated into his account of the journey of the learning soul into his own interior trinity, and as such he is one of the primary starting points in working with will.

An education through the imagination is one of the most aesthetically pleasing of paths. Dante and Shakespeare are the masters of such a journey, although all the other educators used image and narrative to assist their case. The imagination of the learning soul is specifically stimulated by Dante to see what perverted, purifying and clear images are.

The many twisted images of the *Inferno*, the metronomic images of cleansing and refining in *Purgatorio*, the radiant images of the *Paradiso*, and the eventual dropping of images as the Comedy ends, take the learning soul through the complete spectrum of human possibility in ways that facilitate the learner entering similar states. Shakespeare uses the imagination to take the learning soul through empathic journeys of black depth and illuminating height, all the while revealing how the interior works in all its complexity through these phases. Yet even the greatest manipulator of images in Shakespeare – Prospero – eventually discards his magical books once the heights of love have been secured and returns to his everyday life where every third thought will be of his grave.

There are modalities other than the intellect, affection, will, and the imagination that can be used to travel through the massive terrain that is the becoming of Being and the Being of becoming (like remembrance of things past), but these are enough to illustrate the complexity of various options within such a grand narrative. It reveals the intricacy involved in the endeavour to educate a learning soul. Firstly we noted a spectrum within the individual from the most solid of flesh to the most abstract of mind. Secondly we noted different registers of working with this spectrum – pathological, purificatory, and pure. Thirdly, we described a variety of modes in which this spectrum is worked with by the individual – intellectual, emotional, volitional and imaginative. The various learning souls described in the stories are made up of combinations of, and flourishes on, this basic matrix, but work their own unique mix of personality within it. Fourthly, we noted that there can be uneven levels of development within this matrix – a focusing on intellectual development at the cost of emotional development, for example, and hoped that a combination of techniques across modes in depth and height would lead to a well rounded education of the learning soul, focused in on her individuality in a non limiting way.

These four points provide a structure that can be used to educate the whole soul into full expressivity, but more importantly it captures the difficult task of integration that the

learning soul has. Effectively, each learning soul has its own centre of gravity to all these forces and attempts to negotiate its own path through this massive terrain. Crucially, it can get stuck in certain places, or move ahead too quickly, or find itself caught in a repetitive need to go over the same path again and again. Yet these very negatives can also be good for the learning soul, depending on the context. To remain in a certain place, become familiar with its terrain and stabilize oneself in its working is a necessary and enjoyable part of any journey, as is the anticipation of future places or the need to return to past places to complete unfinished business, or to regain something one has lost. It all depends on the local conditions, subtleties beyond a conclusion's capabilities, for it lies in the beauty of detail. The unique intervenes.

Major differences also exist in the various stories: differing emphases given to the pathological twisting of body, soul, and spirit; various assorted possibilities and techniques of purification; and finally major differences over what a pure human being is. With the ancients there is enough similarity to loosely generalize, although any close look in and between these authors reveal massive complications and contradictions, especially over the nature of the body and the education of its drives. For many of them it was possible to touch The Good, the Beautiful, the True, the One – for within ourselves in our highest capacity we were already that. There was an unbroken link between materiality and divinity that could be reached by encouraging that part of ourselves which was divine to open out inside of us through a process of like becoming as Like. This purest part that the learning soul found within could be termed 'spirit'. There was also a powerful recognition of the twisting of our beings downwards into a superficial focus on the corporeal, but this was mostly condemned if it refused to allow an upward reaching for the transcendent. In its own terms the body and material world were celebrated and enjoyed, but within a distinct hierarchy that moved from physical to abstract, from perceptual thought to abstract thought, from things to principles and forms within a disciplined life. Hence we have Plotinus' severe critique of the Gnostics and their demonization of the body and the earthly. But with Augustine we see a severe shift develop within the conception and experience of the learning soul.

With the rise of Christianity an increasing emphasis was placed on the sinfulness of the human being, of its damage within the fall, on its pathology, reaching even into the purity of spirit. Augustine carried this experience deep within. Purgation and purity were difficult paths to follow for a human being trapped in the lusts of the flesh and pride of the self. The unbroken chain between the Divine and the corporeal was broken and in its stead a human emerged with only a divine *image* within, with an imitation, a stamping, a copy. Effectively this meant that the purification process was a harder one, for there was no pure divinity within to pull one upwards, only an image of pure divinity, added to which the pulling downwards of the flesh was also accentuated. The impetus had to come from without in a descent of Grace, and the interior journey that Grace enabled was to find within an image of the Divine without – not the Divine itself. For the learning soul, this involved a radicalisation of will-less-ness, for one's own will was flawed and unable to carry the resolve. It pushed beyond the mind, because it met with a God beyond understanding. It silenced Pride, for it was impossible to undertake the journey without Grace. It increased Love because of how grace descended. A whole range of pedagogic effects resulted from this break between Creator and created, not the least of which was a deep seated working with the conditions of the flesh. Yet we still find within the Christian tradition major experiences of union between God and the soul, shown by the various accounts of Christian Mystics. Thus Christianity contains within it some of the most profound and sophisticated pedagogical techniques of moving from darkness to light in all its human complexity and difficulty. It understands the impossibility of living the Sublime but uses this very recognition as a part of its pedagogical strategy in educating the learning soul.

To dismiss the history of this experiential pedagogy for modernity after we have managed the most difficult of murders – that of God – is a crime, for its luminous details contain much that still speaks to us. We see in both Shakespeare and Descartes ways of responding to the great tradition without dismissal. Shakespeare uses all as fragments for his own creative outpouring, open to the canon but only within his own creative and

renewing terms. Descartes takes the great journeys of the learning soul in ancient and medieval accounts and sifts it through the strain of reason. Both are now venerable traditions within which we work our own struggle to articulate and show what it *is* to educate the human being. In the first we see unique human beings tossed on the sea of Being, learning through the diversity of experience without and within and coming to the universal via the particular. In the second, a calming down into the order of reason presents itself with a clear cogito engaging with a reasonable world as the particular is entered through the universal. We hear the stable Being of Parmenides speaking in the flowing river of Heraclitus. From these early modern beginnings a whole range of offspring have occupied themselves with this most serious of questions and activities.<sup>6</sup> One of the most notable differences is a shifting towards an education that begins from below and builds upwards without the descending hand of Grace to save us, or the Pure Forms to guide us. There is an increasing turn to accounts that begin with basic energies or reasonable principles and attempt to project a course based on an evolution or emergence from these materials – a temporalization of the great chain of being as Lovejoy called it.<sup>7</sup> To chart this terrain is another work, all her sibling attempted here was

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<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to give an impression of this sister work as there is so much that falls within the criteria of the thesis as we move into the Eighteenth Century and beyond. There are the educational novels of France and Germany. Rousseau's *Emile* stands next to the *bildungsroman* tradition of Germany, the first being Wieland's *Agathon*, but the most influential being Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* (picked up by Thomas Mann in his brilliant *The magic mountain*). Less 'educational' but just as crucial for the vision of what paths a learning soul travels in more individualistic times are the great tales of Faustus, Don Quixote, and Robinson Crusoe. On another level there is the astonishing journeys of Kant into the nature of human being, Hegel's turning of it into a masterful dialectical tale in the *Phenomenology*, and Marx opening it out to the forces of the everyday world. The great addition to this thesis as it currently stands would be Proust's *In search of lost time*, for it adds the novelistic genre to the mix as well as the mode of memory to that of intellect, emotion, will and imagination. But there is time enough. Then there are the great experiential poems of Wordsworth, Blake, Yeats, and Eliot and so the list continues. Only if such a work were to continue a deepening insight into the nature of what it means to educate a human being in our contemporary world would I continue the task.

a backdrop illumination of what it has meant for us before the 'Enlightenment' to educate human *being*.

But if we had to take a deep breath and try to articulate what it is this backdrop leaves us with as teachers of learning souls, it is something both obvious and difficult. Firstly, it is incumbent on us as teachers to develop a working insight into what the depths and heights of human being are, for we work within this range by the nature of our profession. As teachers we need the ability to both recognise where our students are and to facilitate their own recognition of where they can go next. The depths and heights pour into the everyday, it is a part of the everyday, the art is to see it and work it. This entails a second skill, an understanding of the diversity and unique richness of experiences within the spectrum. The teacher has to be able to work with different modes in the depths and heights, across different learners and within one learner. A third skill works with the first two – the teacher has to know when to encourage a pushing ahead, a stabilizing, a return to past issues or a leaving alone. Although she might know the terrain in all its complex beauty, she cannot burn the learner with its power, even if the learner (like poor Semele) requests it. The skill is to work simply and lightly with where the learner is. Just because the heights and depths are there in all its complex beauty does not mean that every human being has to traverse it or even 'know' about it. To expect that would mean being in love with impossibility. Indeed the attempt to develop a working insight into the whole spectrum often takes one away from living this life in all its unique messiness, becomes a replacement for precisely what it is meant to point towards. Yet if one feels called to be a teacher of human *being*, then this is the wound one must successfully carry within, until you too are able to work skilfully and freely with *all* that is directly in front of you, able to work within the spectrum directly on the specific and able to use the specific to illuminate the spectrum. It is the defining danger of the teaching path sketched out behind us, the inability to return to the cave, to sacrifice Isaac, to let Virgil and Beatrice go. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Lovejoy (1936) 242. Aurobindo's *A life divine* (1970) is one of the great modern articulators of such a position.

the tension that has kept this thesis moving, to throw away one's books and turn to what they have always pointed to – the real student in front of you.

But now, in the turning to the learner, a new depth appears in the relationship, a depth always there but newly seen. Everything penetrates more deeply and does not stop where it used to. An ability develops to work with body, soul, spirit and the integral nature of all three in the way that Diotima worked with Socrates and *unlike* how Abelard worked with Heloise. There is a silent communication always happening between the deepest parts of us and others, whether we attend to it or not – the presence of Being in the presence of Being. It is a touching of spirit. Certain teachers have learnt how to make this explicit and reveal it to their students who are ready in a silent look, a pointing, or a touch. Sometimes in meeting someone there is a feeling that the other is not only addressing themselves to your ego or face but somehow focusing on your inner core as well, working with the whole of you, not just your surface projections. To put it simply, there are teachers who know how to address the body, soul and spirit of another human being, for they know these realms within their self, much as Piccarda illustrated to Dante. They meet you with a gaze that looks inwards and outwards at the same time. We have met some teachers like this in our travels through ancient and medieval times, who talk to our bodies, souls and spirit with equal music. They encourage us to get into contact with the immense universe inside of us so that we can work with others in useful ways – repeating the wish of Solomon. We teach in the world as we always did, only now its everyday reality has deepened enormously. The reality of suffering is painfully seen and critically engaged with in compassion, the reality of joy shatters the air with light, and the reality of daily work in the community is responsibly and gratefully accepted. Everything is as it always was, only now sensitivity to the astonishing range of events that is always happening opens out in all its particular universality and one does within it what one has to.



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## References

### Appendix One: The Moment of Teaching – my personal synthesis

Let us try to simplify things by taking a look at one moment in a classroom. Using common sense and everyday language to describe the freeze frame (or photograph)<sup>1</sup>– we would have a teacher, some pupils, a classroom, with some sort of activity between them being caught in immobility. Seeing as most of us are teachers, let us rather take the freeze frame as grabbed from our perspective. Still we would have our perspective on the classroom and the pupils, with their arrangement and frozen action pointing to some activity. On closer examination we can point to certain of the pupils, give them names and describe certain traits they have, and reflect on what was happening in that moment, but in doing this we have already gone too far in what I want to do. I don't want the reflection on the photograph, for that is another 'photograph' taken of the photograph. Let us rest with the graphic instant of one moment taken from the teacher's perspective and ask some basic questions about what has happened to time, space, causation, the self, perception, thought and action in the polar moment.

Firstly, there is no time here, it is an instant.<sup>2</sup> If we start to reflect on this photograph, develop the photograph, or take photographs of the photograph, or place it in a sequence

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<sup>1</sup>Barthes on the photograph – 'In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute particular, the sovereign contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *this...*, in short what Lacan calls the *Tuche*, the occasion, the encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression. In order to designate reality, Buddhism says *sunya*, the void: but better still: *tathata*, as Alan Watts has it, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so...

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent' (quoted by Bentley [1998] 108). The book has some interesting reflections on the nature of the Real.

of photographs, then we have time. But in that specular instant of the image hitting the negative we have a timeless moment. Now we must grant that even this instant has a measured time to it, and in this infinity the quicker we move the larger the infinity becomes. But we are working with a different time here, a phenomenological time, and if we take the instant (however small you want the instant to be) on its own then it is timeless, for it does not have a before or after. Now if you want a before, then all we have is a photograph of the photograph. Now this is just another instant and timeless in itself. It is a present instance that took the past as its moment, or a present instance that took the future as its moment.<sup>3</sup> Each instant is original and unique but it does not have to be flat. The moment can be an exceptionally deep experience of the past in the present moment, or an understanding of the depth within the moment as a present moment. Yet in the next instant things have changed, however slightly.

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<sup>2</sup> Momentariness is a way of looking at the world that does not atomise time into moments, but rather atomises phenomena temporally by dismembering them into a course of discrete, momentary entities. Everything passes out of existence as soon as it has originated. As it vanishes it gives rise to a new entity of almost the same nature. So we have an uninterrupted flow of causally connected momentary entities of nearly the same nature. Because they are almost exactly the same, we come to perceive of something as a temporally extended entity even though it is nothing but a series of causally connected momentary entities (cause as we understand it becomes problematic as well, for causes need independent entities to work on). The world at every moment is thus distinct from the world of the previous moment. Entities are too short lived to undergo change. When we think of change as the transmutation of an independently existing entity that changes in time we are missing that this 'independent' 'object' is continuously new and producing itself in ways that are slightly different to what it was. See A. Rospatt's *The Buddhist doctrine of momentariness* (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Dogen on time – 'We cannot be separated from time. This means that because, in reality, there is no coming or going in time, when we cross the river or climb the mountain we exist in the eternal present of time; this time includes all past and present time...Most people think time is passing and do not realize that there is an aspect that is not passing' (Loy [1989] 223).

Secondly, there is no self here, there is only light. The I has become an eye that opens to light.<sup>4</sup> The negative registers a massive infusion of light. It is that light registered. There is no self that thinks about the light it has received in that moment for that is another moment. And if in the other moment we have a self looking at itself looking, then what did the looking that allowed the self to look? It must be another negative, another emptiness that allows this self to look at itself.<sup>5</sup> But then this self that does the looking is different from the self that allows the very looking to happen, and this empty self, this negative self, merely registers the self looking at itself as just another instant of light, no different from the first instant. So we return to the first statement – there is no self here, only light. We may want to call this negative self something else, like spirit, or Self, or the transcendental unity of apperception, it does not really matter so long as we realize that all it is is an open clearing filled with light<sup>6</sup> – not a blinding light of the mystic – just the everyday light of that moment.

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<sup>4</sup> Emerson on this experience – ‘Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me.’ R Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: selected prose and poetry* (1950).

<sup>5</sup> This is the fundamental point of Schelling’s work. He points to it as an Infinite subject. It is a subject that does not stop being a subject when it becomes an object. It can make itself finite but then emerges infinite again but on a higher level of potential. It is not nothing (for it is subject), but it is as nothing (for it does not exist in an objective way). It is devoid of attributes but only grasps itself as an object, as what it is not. Thus this subject does not initially grasps itself as it is for when it is, it becomes an object, what it is not. ‘The absolute subject, which is as nothing, makes itself into something, into a bound, limited, inhibited being. But it is the infinite subject, i.e. the subject which can never be destroyed by anything, and accordingly, as it is something it is also immediately again that which goes beyond itself.’ This process continues until the subject becomes aware of itself as subject, as emptiness, as light. See Schelling (1994) 118–119.

<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Tucci, in *The religions of Tibet* (1980) puts the relationship between light and consciousness as follows. ‘In the entire course of the religious experience of Tibetan man, in all of its manifestations...a

Thirdly, there is no cause and effect here.<sup>7</sup> For a cause to take effect it needs time to operate in, and here we have no time, only a present moment. We need a self to apprehend an effect and work it back to a cause, and we have no self here.<sup>8</sup> There is a

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common fundamental truth is evident: photism, the great importance attached to light, whether as a generative principle, as a symbol of supreme reality; light from which all comes forth and which is present within ourselves' (quoted by Loy [1989] 77).

<sup>7</sup> Nagarjuna puts this succinctly – 'Nowhere are there any entities which have originated from themselves, from another, from both, or from no cause at all.' There are no independent entities that causally interact. This does not mean that causation does not happen, only that the entities that it happens on are continually shifting and changing at the same time. From moment to moment, nothing remains unchanged. If this is the case then cause and effect is not a relationship between two independently existing entities, but something that works on a continually changing world, and as such the common sense use of cause-effect completely fall away' (quoted by Williams [1989] 65–66).

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche makes this point a number of times. Here he is in *The will to power*. 'Critique of the concept 'cause'... We have absolutely no experience of a cause; psychologically considered, we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that we are causes, namely that the arm moves. But this is an error. We separate ourselves, the doers, from the deed, and we make use of this pattern everywhere – we seek a doer for every event...

–In Summa: an event is neither effected nor does it effect. Cause is a capacity to produce effects that has been super-added to the events –

...Only because we have introduced subjects, 'doers', into things does it appear that all events are the consequences of compulsion exerted upon subjects – exerted by whom? again by a 'doer'. Cause and effect – a dangerous concept as long as one thinks of something that causes and something upon which an effect is produced... When one has grasped that the 'subject' is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows. It is only after the model of the subject that we have invented the reality of things and projected them onto the medley of sensations. If we no longer believe in the effective subject, then belief also disappears in effective things, in reciprocation, cause and effect between those phenomena that we call things... At last, the 'thing in itself' also disappears, because this is fundamentally the conception of a 'subject in itself'... If we give up the concept 'subject' and 'object', then also the concept 'substance' – and as a consequence also the various modifications of it, e.g., 'matter', 'spirit', ... etc. We have got rid of

cause and effect that operates on the photograph – light hits the negative and forms an impression that can be developed – but this is to assume more than the instant allows for.<sup>9</sup> And if we move to the next instant, then it too does not offer enough to work in a cause-effect relation. If we try to take in both instants and work with one as cause and the other as effect, then all we have is another instant and so no cause or effect. To have a cause-effect relation there needs to be independently existing objects, but objects change from instant to instant, so what does the cause work on, where is the effect on something that is new in every moment.

Fourthly, there is no space here, at least no space as an empty container that contains objects. There are spatial relations, the thickness of the desk, the roundness of a pupil's head, but that is what space is doing in that place. The instant does not reveal an empty classroom in which certain things happen, it just registers contortions of space in contortions of space. For there to be something like empty space, there would need to be independent entities that wander around in this emptiness, but where are these independent entities? For something to be independent it must have arisen on its own, and the teacher, the pupil, the classroom, the ground are all of dependent origination and are thus manifestations of what space is doing in that moment. Space is just a continuum of ever changing flux.

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materiality' (quoted by Loy [1989] 126–7). No surprises that the Kyoto school finds in Nietzsche a voice that resonates with Mahayana Buddhism.

<sup>9</sup> This is Hume's point in his *Treatise of human nature* (2000). He shows that the causal connection between events is something of which we have no impression, we cannot actually see the cause, what we see are two separate events, and we project into this with some sort of a connection. Similarly, the mind that lies behind the perception is never given to perception, so any idea that we perceive this mind and that it is somehow a self is just a fiction, for this mind is never given to perception, it is what does the perceiving.

Fifthly, there is no perception here. For there to be a perception that one is seeing or hearing, there must be an awareness that one is seeing or hearing, and this is a moment that occurs after the seeing and hearing.<sup>10</sup> To know that one sees is a different instant to the one in which seeing happens. Although one can say that I perceived something happen and attempt to reconstitute the world as an inside that sees an outside, as a world split in half, this very perception when taken as an instant needs an emptiness that does not know that it is perceiving but just perceives the perception that one is seeing. The apparent is the real. There is no deeper reality, that is just another moment.

Sixth, there is no thought here. A thought needs a self, it needs time and space, it needs a cause, and none of these basic categories are in the instant. Instead of a thought we have the registering of the moment as it is. We do not have a thought that is separate from the world, thinking about the world, what we have is a snippet of the world as it is at that point. We have an unsupported thought.<sup>11</sup> Even a thought moment that is a reflection on the world is just a shaving of the world, for it needs a before and after to make it into a thought that we are familiar with – a thought that happens inside the head of an individual about the outside world. In the moment all that a reflective thought is is a slice of the world, and so is the next moment and the next one.

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<sup>10</sup> Yasutani, a contemporary Zen master, puts it as follows. 'Usually when you hear a bell ringing you think, consciously or unconsciously, 'I am hearing a bell.' three things are involved: I, a bell, and hearing. But when the mind is ripe, that is, free of discursive thoughts as a sheet of pure white paper is unmarred by a blemish, there is just the sound of the bell ringing' (quoted by Loy [1989] 71). The point is that all are minds are ripe all of the time, it is just that we do not see it.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger worked towards this in his *Letter on humanism*. Here is the conclusion. 'The thinking that is to come is no longer philosophy, because it thinks more originally than metaphysics... Thinking is on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence. Thinking gathers language into simple saying. *In this way language is the language of Being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky*' (quoted by Loy [1989] 168).

Seventh, there is no action here, for an action needs effort and here in the instant things are effortless<sup>12</sup>, weightless, there is no before to weigh it down or after to push it in a certain direction, there is just things as they are, resting and quiet even in movement. To act would be to try and get from one state of affairs to another but here all we have is a moment, and so action disappears into an effortless resting that allows the new to arise in every moment.

So this moment in teaching is a strange place – it is time-less, space-less, subject-less, cause-less and effect-less, perception-less, thought-less and action-less.<sup>13</sup> Momentariness would seem to collapse the dualities of the world we work within so comfortably. But the

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<sup>12</sup> The Tao is clear on this point. ‘He who devotes himself to learning (seeks) from day to day to increase (his knowledge); he who devotes himself to the Tao (seeks from day to day to diminish (his doing). He diminishes it and again diminishes it, till he arrives at doing nothing (on purpose). Having arrived at *this* point of non-action, there is nothing which he does not do’ (pt 11, ch 48 v 1–2).

There is a beautiful commentary on this verse by the Buddhist Kumaragiva.

‘He carries on the process of diminishing till there is nothing coarse about him which is not put away. He puts it away till he has forgotten all that was bad in it. Then he puts away all that is fine about him. He does so until he has forgotten all that was good in it. But the bad was wrong, and the good is right. Having diminished the wrong, and also diminished the right, the process is carried along until both are forgotten. Passion and desire are both cut off, and his virtue and the Tao are in such union that he does nothing; but though he does nothing, he allows all things to do their own doing, and all things are done.’ (In Legge’s commentary on the Tao)

<sup>13</sup> We are left with something very similar to the noumenal realm of Kant over here. But we are going to say more about it than he allows for in his critiques, for as Schelling points out in his *On the history of modern philosophy* (1994) 100, Kant land up not being able to say anything about the noumenal, even though he needs it as that which explains everything in the last instance. ‘If we now ask what that (the noumenal) can still be, which is not in time, not in space, which is not substance, not accident, not cause, not effect, then we will have to admit that the unknown does not = x, as Kant designates it..., but that it = 0, that it has become absolutely nothing for us...unexplained experience.’ It is this lack that philosophy since then has tried to fill and the project which inspired German Idealism.

wonderful world of the moment can reverse its phenomenological descriptions almost exactly. We can equally imagine the moment to be time-full, space-full, subject-full, cause-full and effect-full, perception-full, and action full.<sup>14</sup> Let us look at this strange reversal before working out why it happens.

If we take the moment of time it can reduce to an instant that becomes smaller and smaller as we attempt its measurement, and its smallness is enlarged by the infinity of past and future time that pushes in on it from either side. But take the instant as it is from the inside and then all we have is the instant and then another instant.<sup>15</sup> From the inside it works as a perpetual present and as such becomes timefull, it takes up all of time, leaving no future or past, only a continual current<sup>16</sup>. This is timeless in that it exists only as a moment, but it is timefull in that it becomes the whole of time, for any thought of the past and hope of the future happens in only one place, the present moment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> We see these almost exact reversals in the work of Parmenides and Heraclitus, Spinoza and Fichte, Mahayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. They are almost exact opposites that catch in their very oppositeness the same phenomenological effect. The first half of the appendix tries to catch the essence of Heraclitus, Mahayana Buddhism, and the radical empiricists such as William James. The second half works with the insights of Parmenides, Advaita Vedanta, and Spinoza.

<sup>15</sup> Language is struggling to catch this point. Zeno well knew the paradox of moving from instant to instant when working with independently existing objects, rather than with a present flow. When I say from instant to instant, if one is in the instant, then it is continuous, if one is out of the instant then it is cut up.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein puts it as follows – ‘If by eternity is understood not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality, then it can be said that a man lives eternally if he lives in the present’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*).

<sup>17</sup> T.S Eliot puts it as follows in the Four Quartets – ‘Time past and time future\ What might have been and what has been\ Point to one end, which is always present’ (Eliot [1974] 190).

If we take what happens to the self as it reduces from all its emotions and thoughts to a moment of light we could look at this as a loss of self, but it is also an expansion of self to become the world.<sup>18</sup> No self becomes all self, it becomes everything that is there at the moment, it becomes the moment, and in that spectacular reduction to a negative<sup>19</sup> it becomes precisely what is current.<sup>20</sup>

If we take what happens to space, it reduces itself from a universal container that holds things to what is happening in a specific place and time to space in that moment. But as such this reduction makes space happen everywhere, everything becomes space and its

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<sup>18</sup> This is the Fichtian insight. Fichte argues that the principle is that 'as surely as man is a rational being, he is the end of his own existence. His being is its own ultimate object, this is the characteristic of considering man as a rational being. But the non ego will approach and influence him through sense, and in a determinate existence man is a sensuous being. But reason must not be superceded by sense, they must exist in harmony and this harmony assumes that 'Whatever man is, that he should be solely because he is, i.e. all that he is should proceed from his pure ego, from his own simple personality, and whatever he cannot be solely upon that ground he should absolutely not be.' Man should always be at one with himself, – he should never contradict his own being. This is the ultimate vocation of every finite, rational being is this absolute identity, constant identity, perfect harmony with himself. See *The popular works of J.G. Fichte* 1889:150–155.

<sup>19</sup> T S Eliot again – 'In order to arrive there, to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. In order to arrive at what you do not know You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance... In order to arrive at what you are not You must go through the way in which you are not. And what you do not know is the only thing you know... And where you are is where you are not' (*Four Quartets, East Coker*, pt 111).

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein puts it as follows in his notebooks. 'Here we can see that solipsism coincides with pure realism, if it is strictly thought out. The I of solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and what remains is the reality co-ordinate with it.' (2.9.1916) 'At last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side nothing is left over, and on the other side, as unique, the world. In this way idealism leads to realism if it is strictly thought out' (15.10.1916). Quoted by Loy (1988) 204.

particular manifestation is what happens through the whole of existence. It becomes a fluid, sinuous, fullness that is continually shifting and moving from moment to moment. In one moment it is full, and in the next it is full, even though the manifestation of this fullness changes. In each moment it is complete and all pervading, and as the next moment happens and it is different, it is equally full. But this fullness means that nothing changes, and that the appearance of change is just that, *appearance* of a fullness that is always the same.<sup>21</sup>

If we take what happens to cause and effect. Its loss would open up a world of enormous freedom for one is free of past chains and future ties, but this freedom is also one of absolute determination<sup>22</sup>, but now it is a determination of the present. Cause and effect disappear in the moment only to reappear as the determination of the moment, for as moment after moment arises as a moment, it can be nothing else but that moment, just as a photograph cannot be anything else but a photograph. Cause and effect merge into substance as it is in the moment.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Parmenides makes this point when he excludes non being from what can be talked about, leaving only what is. This is a world of absolute fullness that lacks generation (for that would involve non being coming to be), destruction (for that would involve being becoming non being), change (for that would entail both generation and destruction). Parmenides is the first recorded philosopher of the classical west to put forward a coherent argument in writing – a poem that is an allegory of his intellectual journey at the feet of an unnamed goddess who shows him a world that is a Way of Truth, beyond the everyday world of Seeming. It can be used, point by point, to understand what a moment in teaching is.

<sup>22</sup> This is Spinoza's point as Schelling puts it – 'For surprised, as it were, by blind being, as the unexpected, which no thought can anticipate... , overtaken, I say, by being, which blindly descends upon him, which swallows its own beginning. He even loses consciousness, all power and all freedom of movement, in relation to this being' (Schelling [1994] 66).

<sup>23</sup> This is the insight of Spinoza as Schelling points out again – 'Spinoza calls God *causa sui*, but in the narrow sense that He is through the sheer necessity of his essence, without being able to be held onto as

If we take perception, then no perception becomes all perception, for all that there is in the moment is a perception of that moment in its fullness. The fact that when one perceives one forgets that one is perceiving is what leads to perception taking on heightened clarity. The idea that one is perceiving something obscures what one is perceiving, only once the fact of perception is forgotten can full perception happen. Perception-less becomes perception-full. But perception-full happens in another way, all the world becomes the perception at that moment. There is no outside world that is being perceived, there is only perception filling every nook and cranny. To try and make it an act of perception on a world and limit perception in this way is not possible in the moment, for that would demand another perception, and so perception expands to take over the whole world in the phenomenological moment.

If we take thought, then thought-less become thought-full. An emptying of mind that has to be the condition of any thought in a moment allows for any thought that the moment demands to arise. There is no limiting of thought by past patterns of thought or conceptual classifications<sup>24</sup>, there is an opening of thought, a freeing of thought that allows originality to spontaneously come, for every moment is spontaneous and original if taken on its own. It can be nothing else. So all thought becomes possible, for it is not limited by a past or future<sup>25</sup>, but at the same time the moment demands only one thought,

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being able to be; the cause has completely merged into the effect, and behaves only as substance, against which his thought can do nothing' (Schelling [1994] 65).

<sup>24</sup> Think of the Web of Penelope – a work never ending, still beginning, never done, but ever in hand.

<sup>25</sup> T.S Eliot puts it as follows in the Four Quartets.

‘The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
for the pattern is new in every moment  
and every moment is a new and shocking  
valuation of all we have been’ (*East Coker* II lines 34–37).

a spontaneous thought, but only one thought that is that moment.<sup>26</sup> Freedom and determination reduce to the same thing.

If we take action, then no action becomes all action.<sup>27</sup> For now the moment demands an exact action, it is that action. The all self, all space, all time, all cause and effect, all perceiving, all thinking moment demands an action, it is an action, and that action is not someone doing something, it is what happens in that moment and the more the teacher is in the moment the more that moment will just demand actions that the teacher will do, and so there will just be action in its fullness.<sup>28</sup> But this action only becomes possible if

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<sup>26</sup> Krishnamurti makes this point when students complain in his supposedly 'free' schools that he is telling them what to do. 'You deal with the fact. To take one example: someone asked, 'Can I put the tent up?' And I said, 'Don't do it near the road.' She said 'Why not? I am a free person.' In other words 'you needn't tell me.' So I told the person why. You go into it so that she understands the situation, which is factual. The point is to be open to the facts without attachment, so that what ever the current situation is, you respond to it as is, without pushing a past agenda or future end. The thought that is needed by that moment can arise because you are open to the moment without attachment' (Krishnamurti [1990] 209). Much of this essay is inspired by his pedagogical insights.

<sup>27</sup> 'One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men, and he is in the transcendental position, though engaged in all sorts of activities. Abandoning all attachment to the results of his activities, ever satisfied and independent, he performs no fruitive action, although engaged in all kinds of undertakings' (*Bhagavad-Gita* 4– 18, 20).

<sup>28</sup> This full action descends on one complete, as Nietzsche well understood – 'If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one's system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation – in a sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down – that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightening, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form – I never had any choice...

Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity. –The involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no

one is totally still, for only in the stillness of the self will the action become apparent, otherwise it will be obscured by past desires and future expectations.<sup>29</sup>

Now this reduction to either side of the polarities just discussed should not surprise us when working with the moment. It is a taking of a polarity and pushing it to its extreme, to the point where the polarity collapses and becomes its opposite. The opposites, when extended, link up behind and in front of each other, and become one, a circle. The problem is not the experience but putting it in a language that works with a subject-predicate base that needs dualities to make meaning of non-duality – paradox<sup>30</sup> or silence<sup>31</sup> results.

So what are we left with when working with one moment in the classroom?

We have a timeless, spaceless, selfless, free from cause and effect, perceptionless, thoughtless, actionless moment that is saturated with present time and space, drenched with self, absolutely determined, full with one thought and demanding one action. This is the teaching moment. We are always already in this moment, whether we think so or

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longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression (quoted by Loy [1988] 206).

<sup>29</sup> In the incomparable words of T. S. Eliot. 'At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;\ Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,\ But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,\ Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,\ Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,\ There would be no dance, and there is only the dance' (Eliot [1974] 191).

<sup>30</sup> Hence the famed koans of the Zen Buddhists like 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

<sup>31</sup> Plato insisted that on these topics and experiences he never wrote for it was impossible to catch with words. Dear Cordelia felt this lack when asked to say how much she loved her father and king and was prepared to lose all not to say the inexpressible.

not.<sup>32</sup> But if we want to gain more awareness of this moment<sup>33</sup>, rather than leaving it for our epiphanies of teaching then we must develop a practice of the self<sup>34</sup> – one of

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<sup>32</sup> This is the Buddhist insight that we are all already enlightened – samsara and nirvana are exactly the same.

<sup>33</sup> To become fully aware of the moment takes serious practice and often leads to a dark night of the teaching soul. There has to be a dark night of the soul for us to shift from a dual state of teaching to a non-dual state in a stabilized fashion. This does not have to be spectacular suffering like Job or St John of the Cross, it can just be the daily practice of teaching, that day in and day out practice that makes of our teaching something beautiful. Teaching forces you to be where others are, for you have to empathize and understand their responses and questions, and this can only be done by a subtle losing of yourself each time, and in this losing of yourself to hear the other you get closer to the non dual reality that is where you are in a radical present that is just the question, or the response of the pupil, happening in an emptiness that allows that question to be heard for what it is. In this practice there is no ecstasy, for that would bring yourself to the forefront and stop you from being in that moment. Afterwards there may be ecstasy in remembering the beauty of that moment, but at the time all there is a falling away of self to what is there, not a glorying of the self in what has happened. The teacher must keep his ignorance present, for otherwise he imposes his agenda and interpretation on the class and does not gain a knowledge of what is actually going on. The class has a way of showing that they are dissatisfied with a state of affairs where they are being ignored because the teacher presumes to know, and the class has a way of responding to a teacher who keeps himself continually open to them without assuming that he knows it all. Teaching also has a certain practice of dispossession, where the teacher finds fulfilment in a giving of self, in a giving away of time, self, knowledge and interest. To teach is to continually dispossess yourself for others. The teacher is continually forced to become what he is not in order to function properly in the classroom and in this process learns the art of going through the long dark night of the soul in the everyday world of school practice. Teaching is asceticism. The only problem is that we do not understand this process in its fullness and get corrupted by the rewards for this practice before the full breakthrough into the non-dual, into the ever-present, occurs. Teaching, seen clearly, is a practice of self becoming non-self, of possession becoming dispossession, of knowledge becoming ignorance. It is here that true teaching happens and it is here that we find the work of transformation happening on ourselves. Proper teaching leads to a path of enlightenment by its very nature, nothing spectacular, just a lesson happening how it should, happening across the world by practitioners who do not theorize or elaborate, just do, and the practice continues to purify and uplift. This is the beauty of teaching.

humility<sup>35</sup>, attention<sup>36</sup> and love.<sup>37</sup> We already practice this in the classroom everyday, teaching is such a practice.

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<sup>34</sup> Foucault woke up to the need for a practice of the self only late in his life, but it is a field of research much neglected by post-modernists. The analysis of the emptiness of the subject and its artificial construction is the starting point of practice in both east and west that leads to paths beyond the ego self, something one would struggle to guess when reading the post modernists.

<sup>35</sup> The non-dual teacher must keep a humility about him as he learns to live in the world of non-duality. It is easy to allow the great achievements of this state to dominate. This is very dangerous because as soon as you allow a sense of the magnitude of the achievement to permeate then you will find your energy and vigour sapped, the task will become heavy and difficult to carry, for with accomplishment comes the weight of the achievement. Always keep in mind that what you have achieved is nothing, that you have become nothing to do this, and then the achievements will continue to flow effortlessly. So too with eloquence in articulating your lessons. It is easy to use the images you have used before to create the desired effect, but then you have lost your eloquence in its repetition. Lorca puts it best, and allow me the irony of quoting him over here on the singing of the Andalusian flamenco singer, Pastora Pavan, in a tavern in Cadiz. 'She sang with her voice of shadow, with her voice of liquid metal, with her moss covered voice, and with her voice tangled in her long thick hair. She would soak her voice in manzilla, or loose it in dark and distant thickets. Yet she failed completely: it was all to no purpose. The audience remained silent...Only a little man...said sarcastically in a low voice: 'Viva Paris!' as if to say: 'Here we do not care for ability, technique, or mastery. Here we care for something else.' At that moment Pastora Pavon got up like a woman possessed, broken as a medieval mourner, drank without pause a large glass of cazalla, a fire water brandy, and sat down to sing without voice, breathless, without subtlety, her throat burning, but with Duende. She succeeded in getting rid of the scaffolding of the song, to make way for a furious and fiery Duende...that made those who were listening tear off their clothes' (Hughes [1994] 246-7).

<sup>36</sup> Two traits are needed to attend correctly according to Simone Weil – love and humility. Intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is Love for Weil. This is attention at its highest, and it is not an easy state to reach, it certainly is not reached by instructing a class of students to 'pay attention'. It is not about frowning ones brow, or sitting upright, or nodding one's head, nor is it about an instructing of the will to listen up. The will has a way of drifting around and not attending as anyone who has practiced any form of meditation or prayer well knows. Weil argues that the most successful route to attention is through making the intellect desire, and desire is aroused by pleasure and joy in the activity itself, not via

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consequences, benefits or returns. To enter into the activity itself entails suspending thought, leaving it detached, empty, ready to be penetrated by the object, holding other diverse knowledge at a lower level. This is a type of attention that waits on truth, does not go searching for it but desires its coming. Weil compares truth to a poor, inarticulate vagabond in court faced by a witty and verbose judge, who just like our intellect judges and speaks before the inarticulate has a chance to manifest itself. Her work gives excellent guidelines for how to pursue the moment in teaching. See Panichas' excellent selection of her work in *The Simone Weil reader* (1977).

<sup>37</sup> This is the insight of Christ in his sermon on the mount – 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have *thy* cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father, which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans do the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5 v 38–47 King James version).

