

THE ROMANTIC LEGACY: CRITIQUE AND CRISIS

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My text for today comes from Peter Blakey who, as I was standing at the back listening to the previous speaker, remarked to me 'stories are subjective'. They are indeed — as we shall see.

I start with the reminder that even the idea of a conference such as this is essentially romantic or post-romantic. If you had proposed to hold a conference on the relationship between art and religion in the pre-romantic period there would have been no central theme. It was obvious what the role of art was to religion, and there would have been little need to discuss it, let alone make from it a problem. The role of art was to illustrate, to convince, to act, if you like, as a visual sermon, commentary or addendum to the great truths revealed already in the Bible and by the Christian religion. The notion that art could say original things or be central to religious *exploration* would have been largely unintelligible to a pre-eighteenth-century world.

What provoked the change was not so much a crisis in art as a crisis in epistemology as a whole. One can, I think, say in general terms that until the early eighteenth century there was a very wide-spread belief that the progress of science and philosophy would support and illustrate the great revealed truths of Christianity. This is very clear if you look, for example, at the founders of the Royal Society at the end of the seventeenth century. For Boyle, Locke, Newton, Spratt and the rest there was no clash between science and religion. Many eminent divines were themselves members of the Royal Society. My favourite is Bishop Wilkins, who, in addition to devising a new scientific language which would improve the lamentably confused processes of human thought, also wrote a lengthy dissertation on the structure and necessary provisioning of Noah's Ark. In particular, he addressed himself to a logistical problem that had escaped most previous biblical commentators. That is, if you are taking two of every animal and a lot of your animals are carnivores, you may have

difficulty in ending up the voyage with the same number of animals as you started with. In addition, Noah's and his family also had to be fed. Since the Patriarchs had been shepherds, Wilkins decided that sheep were the obvious food, and calculated that to meet all this extra demand for mutton over the forty days of the voyage it would be necessary to take an extra 1,888 sheep on board, in addition to the two chosen sheep for the survival of the species. He demonstrated not merely of how this will work out, but also the right cabin distribution for the animals. You can't, he pointed out, put elephants and giraffes and hippopotamuses all on the one side of the boat.

Nowhere is this confident bond between science and religion in the late seventeenth century clearer than in the case of Newton himself, who, as many of you know, devoted as much time to discussions of biblical prophecy than he did to astronomy and mathematics. That belief in an objective and religious view of the universe that could be scientifically supported holds good until sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century — and for convenience I am going to locate its breakdown with the work of Hume, the sceptical Scottish philosopher. As everyone knows, it was he who is supposed to have 'awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumbers' and launched the German on a philosophical career that was to reverse the whole course of human thought.

Hume, you will recall, had demonstrated that human reason unaided was likely to lead not towards faith, but to complete scepticism. What we liked to think of as 'proof' was usually little more than habit and a balance of probability. Even the sun rising next morning could be shown to be more a matter of accumulated probabilities than real certainty. For anyone with eyes to see, after Hume the idea of a rational and objective universe was increasingly difficult to sustain. For Kant the alternative was to construct a view of the world starting not from objective and calculable truths but from the inescapable nature of our own subjectivity. This is Kant's famous 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy. He starts from the assumption that it is simply no good trying to construct an objective world. What we have to begin with is the nature of our own subjectivity. Kant went on in the First Critique (*The Critique of Pure Reason*) to show how we live in a world of our own constructs. According to this view space and time are not objectively out there in the universe, but rather qualities which we read into it. There can, in short, be no such thing as

perspectiveless knowledge. That so startling a revolution in human thought should have survived all challenges until now is probably a tribute as much to our inability to grasp the full implications of what this means as to the power of Kant's argument. But it is central to what follows.

It is normal to advise students to avoid defining a word a word so complex as 'romanticism', but I want here to disregard my own good advice, and to suggest, as a working and tactical definition, that we can regard it as the attempt to construct a view of the world in art and literature starting from our own subjectivity. I think one can relate a great deal of what is going on in art, music, literature and indeed in philosophy as well, to this historic attempt in the wake of Kant to approach the external world primarily through our sense of self rather than vice versa. Once we assume this, certain not-very-obvious consequences follow; and it is the nature of those not very obvious consequences that I want to address in particular this morning. The first of these is that the nature of self consciousness becomes not merely interesting, but central. If we must ground our experience of the world, not to mention our experience of God, in our own self-consciousness, the question of what *is* our own self consciousness then becomes absolutely vital.

The second point arising from this, is that in such a case art moves from a peripheral and essentially decorative role into an absolutely essential one. This is, of course, the reason of course why we are gathered here today. I'll try and spell out the consequences of those two points in greater detail. If, as Kant argues in the first two *Critiques*, those of *Pure Reason* and the *Practical Reason*, we can only know the appearances of things and not their true reality, there remains an unbridgeable gap between the world of the will and intuitions of God (what he calls Pure Reason), and the world of sense-perception (Practical Reason). In Kant's *Third Critique*, that of *Judgement*, or, more properly, aesthetics, he attempts to bridge to gap between the first two *Critiques* by postulating a link through art. How far he was successful in this is still a matter of some controversy, but what is important is that he deliberately moves art from a purely decorative role to one where it becomes the only hope for perceiving reality.

Romanticism is, in a sense, then, an attempt to work out the implications of this movement of art from periphery to centre. In *The Critique of Judgement* Kant writes:

Of all the arts poetry (which owes its origins almost entirely to genius and will be least guided by precept for example) maintains the first rank. It expands the mind by setting the imagination at liberty and offering, within the limits of a given concept, amid the unbounded variety of possible forms accordant therewith, that which unites the presentment of this concept with a wealth of thought to which no verbal expression is completely adequate, and so rising aesthetically to ideas.¹

This statement is the more remarkable in view of the fact that Kant was not overfond of poetry, and did not consider it a suitable medium for the serious business of philosophy. In 1796 he entered into a fierce debate with another idealist philosopher, Friedrich Jacobi, over precisely this question. In an article entitled 'On a certain Genteel Tone which has of late appeared in Philosophy', Kant complained that Jacobi was 'poeticising' his system by stressing the role of intuition and feeling. 'Philosophy, Kant sternly declared, 'is fundamentally prosaic; and to attempt to philosophise poetically is very much as if a merchant should undertake to make up his account-books in poetry'.² His description of poetry as the art-form most guided by genius rather than aesthetic convention, in the passage cited above, suggests that he sees it here as being (for his purposes) the most highly developed art form. It was common in the eighteenth century to take poetry as the representative art form for theoretical discussion, but Kant here seems to be attributing to poetry a status over and beyond language or a mere pattern of written words on the page — which is much more unusual, though it is to be found in contemporary ideas of the 'sublime'.

Such a move is both part cause and part effect of a general shift of thought going on in the late eighteenth century. We can see this change in the status of literature very clearly, for instance, in way the word 'literature' itself changes its meaning. If you consult the Oxford English Dictionary you will see that our modern sense of the word, as a form of value-added writing, comes into existence at round about this time. The older meaning of the word is merely concerned with writing. The new idea of literature, as writing that reached out to the sublime and says more than can ever be said about it, is quite new. It is, of course, the origin of the modern

critical axiom that meaning cannot be totalised, cannot be exhausted, and forms part of a whole nexus of ideas that belong to the group of young self-styled 'Romantics' associated with the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and August, in Jena in the late 1790s.

This 'boiling point' of ideas which we know as German Romanticism included a number of younger philosophers who called themselves Idealists and who saw themselves as followers of Kant — though Kant, as we have seen in the case of Jacobi, fairly rapidly repudiated nearly all of them because they were moving forward into an area into which he was not willing to go. This was an area very much concerned with human subjectivity and self-consciousness. I am here thinking not merely of Jacobi, but of Fichte and Schelling as well (successively professors of philosophy at Jena), who went on to explore the idea and implications of self-consciousness in immense detail. Their work leads on, rather interestingly, towards Freud, in many ways their natural descendant, who takes it out of the realm of philosophy and into the realm of psychology. For these Romantic philosophers, psychology was not so much an exploration of qualities which God had implanted in us and became, instead, an exploration of both the material universe and the way in which, if there was a God, we might also discover Him. Freud, of course, as a good Feuerbachian, was not willing to follow them down that road. But I wish here to turn to another early German Romantic because he sums up what was very widely understood as a Kantian Idealist position.

No poetry, no reality. Just as there is, despite all the senses, no external world without imagination, so too there is no spiritual world without feeling, no matter how much sense there is. Whoever only has sense can perceive no human being, but only what is human: all things disclose themselves to the magic wand of feeling alone. It fixes people and seizes them; like the eye, it looks on without being conscious of its own mathematical operation.³

Though this aphorism appears in a collection published by Friedrich Schlegel, the writer was in fact not one of the Schlegel brothers, but a friend of theirs, a young Lutheran pastor named Friedrich Schleiermacher — later, of course, to become the most celebrated theologian of his age. His point here is one we have

already seen hinted at by Kant, that poetry permits a greater understanding of reality than the senses themselves. Moreover, just as there is, despite all the senses, no external world without imagination, so there is no spiritual world without feeling.

At this period the Jena Romantic circle, with the exception of Novalis, was, if not atheistic, totally hostile to organised religion of any sort. In fact, Friedrich Schlegel and his wife, Dorothea, were later received into the Catholic Church, while Schelling, who was at this stage a Spinozistic pantheist, also moved towards a much more conventional religious position — possibly under the influence of Coleridge. But Schleiermacher was unusual among the Jena Romantics in that he was not merely a Christian, but had actually chosen to be ordained — a fact which aroused total incredulity among the rest of his social circle. On his birthday in 1797 he was working in his flat in Berlin when there was a great hammering on the door and in burst all his friends from Jena, who had organised a surprise birthday party. In the course of this they challenged him to write a book defending and explaining his incomprehensible position. To encourage him Friedrich Schlegel announced that he was moving in with him for the next 18 months to keep him to his promise. The result was that astonishing work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.

To sum up: at the end of the eighteenth century we find within a generation a movement from seeing poetry as a largely ornamental, and as it were a flower of civilisation, to being the key to reality. I don't want wish to suggest for a moment that earlier views underrated the arts but I do want to suggest very strongly that they gave them a different status. The reasoning goes more or less as follows: whereas through ordinary sense perception, as Kant insisted, we cannot have any real knowledge of the objective world. Because our senses are subjectively organised they are deceptive. We may approximate towards knowledge of things-in-themselves, but we will never do more than approximate. But — and this is a kind of Kantian logic that Kant himself was very wary of — it is in the nature of art to make precisely that leap from the Practical Reason to the Pure Reason and so to be able to open up a direct intuition of the infinite, of things-in-themselves, and even of God. In other words, our idea of reality is ultimately anchored in the role of the arts. This is what I meant earlier by saying that this conference today is a highly romantic conference: because an essential part of my thesis is going to be that

Modernism, Postmodernism and all the other movements that we have been discussing here have been rooted in that extraordinary philosophical turn around at the end of the eighteenth century.

We have, you will recall, identified two simultaneous directions in early German Romanticism: one, associated primarily with Fichte and Schelling, towards an ever more complex inner exploration of the ego; the other, with Schleiermacher and the Schlegels, towards an outward exploration, with a new impetus to discover art and to relate art to intuition and to religion. I want now to move very rapidly in my intellectual tour of Europe to Chateaubriand, whose *Genius of Christianity* was published in 1802. This is another enormously influential work in the new romantic consciousness that was spreading across Europe. If we can use the Germans as illustrative of the new Romantic philosophy of art that was being hammered out at this time, it is to Britain and France at the same period that we must look for a more practical and historical understanding of these ideas. Chateaubriand's thesis was at once simple and comprehensive. In *The Genius of Christianity* he claims that *all* art and literature — that is, not merely Christian art and literature, but that of the pagan world as well — was inspired by his religion.

That Christianity has been the inspiration for the art and literature of the past thousand years is, for Chateaubriand, quite obvious. But Christianity is not merely the fount of modern culture, it also provides retrospectively the culmination and explanation of all previous culture. Just as it was traditionally believed the Old Testament pointed outside itself to its fulfilment in the New, so the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome could only be fulfilled by the Christianity yet in the future. Plato and Aristotle, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Homer and Virgil are, without the slightest difficulty, hauled into the great inclusive net of Christianity. Chateaubriand takes issue with the classicists of the period by arguing that the Bible is the greatest and most sublime work of literature — leading on into modern literature in a way that classical literature does not.

Christianity is, if we may so express it, a double religion. Its teaching has reference to the nature of intellectual being, and also to our own nature: it makes the mysteries of the Divinity and the mysteries of the human heart go hand in hand; and, by

removing the veil that conceals the true God, it also exhibits man as he really is.

Such a religion must necessarily be more favourable to the delineation of *characters* than another which dives not into the secret of the passions. The fairer half of poetry, the dramatic, received no assistance from polytheism, for morals were separated from mythology.⁴

In other words the idea of 'character' in literature is not merely an idea which, as it were, grew up historically under the shade of Christianity, the idea of an individual, with a personal sense of self, and their own will and consciousness, is an essential part of Christianity. Chateaubriand doesn't deny for a moment that, for example, the Greek traditions had intuitions of this, but Greek tragedy only finds its fulfilment within a Christian philosophy. Not least of the astounding qualities of this book — and, for me, one of the most interesting — is that it was written not by a member of the clergy, or even a professional theologian, but by a Catholic layman. Indeed, as was the way with many new ideas, the Catholic Church was distinctly wary of it for sometime afterwards.

I now want to move forward briefly into English literature, to explore the way in which this notion of character works out in Romantic thought. I have to turn to English literature because the astonishing thing about the Germans I have been quoting is the abstractness of their theorising. They go on at great length about the need for literature, the arts, philosophy and theology to be a single integrated whole — while at the same time producing very few actual works of art to support their theory. Friedrich Schlegel, did indeed write one novel, *Lucinde* — which, though very difficult to follow, was almost immediately attacked as pornographic. It can't have been very pornographic because its sales were infinitesimal. Hölderlin, admittedly, was a great poet; Goethe was a great novelist, but the fact remains that the lack of German works to illustrate the Romantics' thesis is actually quite astonishing. As a result, you will find over and over again what the German writers are doing is using English writers to illustrate their ideas about German literature. There is, for instance, one marvellous point in *Wilhelm Meister* when Goethe wants to cite examples of literary heroes he lists 'Grandison, Clarissa, Pamela, the Vicar of Wakefield, Tom Jones ...'⁵ Not even the novelist

Wieland makes it into his list at this point. It is amazing how the whole German aesthetic debate which is so vital for European romanticism is symbiotic with English literature of the same period.

It is, therefore, as a direct illustration of the new German and French aesthetic ideas that I turn now to two English novels which, though they may not be very well known, show how aesthetics have moved to the centre of any debate about reality, and demonstrate in action the new idea of character as self-consciousness. The first is Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia*, and the second is a novel by his arch enemy, John Henry Newman, *Callista*. We have become so accustomed to seeing Kingsley and Newman as rivals, locked in the theological conflict that was to lead up to the writing of the *Apologia*, that it comes as something of a shock to discover that, as novelists, they are surprisingly similar in their basic assumptions. Moreover, if the rabidly anti-Catholic, flamboyantly heterosexual Protestant Kingsley can so join hands with the Catholic, and probably homosexual Newman, we are likely to be looking at something that runs very deep beneath the particular conflicts and represents something powerful in the spirit of age.

The plot of *Hypatia* can quickly told. It comes from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Hypatia, the daughter of Theon the mathematician, was initiated in her father's studies; her learned comments have elucidated the geometry of Appollonius and Diophantus; and she publicly taught, both at Athens and Alexandria, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. In the bloom of beauty, and in the maturity of wisdom, the modest maid refused her lovers and instructed her disciples; the persons most illustrious for their rank or merit were impatient to visit the female philosopher; and Cyril [Archbishop of Alexandria] beheld with a jealous eye the gorgeous train of horses and slaves who crowded the door of her academy. A rumour was spread among the Christians that the daughter of Theon was the only obstacle to the reconciliation of the praefect and the archbishop; and that obstacle was speedily removed. On a fatal day, in the holy season of Lent, Hypatia was torn from her chariot, stripped naked, dragged to the church, and inhumanly butchered by the hands of Peter the reader and a

troop of savage and merciless fanatics: her flesh was scraped from her bones with oyster-shells, and her quivering limbs were devoured by the flames.⁶

Such an irresistible combination of sex, violence, and religion with historical documentation was just waiting for a novelist to take it up. Incidentally, though it is sometimes dismissed as being only a minor Victorian novel, it has shown astonishing stamina, having been continuously in print ever since the 1840s when it was written. Kingsley's portrait of an Alexandria run by groups of rioting and murderous monks is one of the more interesting and original pictures of early Christianity — running directly counter to the more respectable views of the early church that were being promulgated in other novels on the early church. Incidentally, so far as I know, Kingsley's portrait of the Alexandrian church is pretty accurate. The place *was* being run by a bunch of thugs. His description of the expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria by Cyril's monks is one that would be eerily familiar to anyone who has seen the film of *Schindler's List*. The rounding up of the Jews in an orderly fashion, the stripping of their possessions, and the marching them off to an unspecified destination is the now all-too-familiar stuff of ethnic cleansing.

Kingsley himself says about the novel:

I cannot hope that these pages will be all together free from anachronisms and errors. I can only say that I have laboured honestly and industriously to discover the truth even in the minutest details and to sketch the age, its manners, and its literature, as I have found them — altogether artificial, slipshod effete, resembling far more the times of Louis Quinze than those of Socrates and Plato.⁷

This is a scarcely coded address to two major Victorian concerns: classicism, and fear of the revolutionary mob — the conflict between eternal values and their violent overthrow. By a brilliant inversion, in which paganism is identified with classicism and Christianity with mob-violence, both are presented as aspects of a civilisation in its death-throes. It is not a period which we would recognise from our childhood classical studies. It is more brutal even than the French revolution and is the driving force behind this revolution is the Church.

The novel opens with the Egyptian desert, where a monk is sitting contemplating his fate. The atmosphere of decay is introduced on the first page, in what is, literally, a classical twilight. It is littered with ruins and fragments:

Here and there, upon the face of the cliffs which walled the opposite side of the narrow glen below, were cavernous tombs, huge old quarries, with obelisks and half-cut pillars, standing as the workmen had left them centuries before; the sand was slipping down and piling up around them; their heads were frosted with the arid snow; everywhere was silence, desolation — the grave of a dead nation in a dying land.⁸

The physical ruins of the landscape are matched by the intellectual decay of classical paganism represented by the beautiful but deluded Hypatia. The classicism that inspired the Schlegels and Schleiermacher's romanticism is reduced either to sterile formality or to an introverted complexity understood only by its initiates — if at all. Hypatia lectures to crowded halls of students in Alexandria on the mysteries of Neo-platonism, spinning from Homer ever more elaborate mystical and allegorical interpretations. The theme of a dying Egypt runs throughout. This is not a new world of Christianity, but the old world of the Roman Empire heading towards its ultimate destruction by the barbarians of the North. In midst of all this decay stands Hypatia, the young and beautiful woman philosopher. Kingsley spares no details in his portrait here to stress that she is a powerful and original thinker. Though as a pagan, she is ultimately mistaken, she is a far more powerful and accurate thinker than many of her opponents in the Alexandrian church — from which she recoils as much in moral as intellectual revulsion.

Here, for this portrait of a female philosopher, Kingsley is drawing upon a very interesting novel that appeared only a few years before: William Ware's, *Zenobia or the Fall of Palmyra* (1837). Now a rare work (I know of only one copy in Australia) it contains a fascinating portrait of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, and founder of the great but short-lived Palmyrene Empire in the time of the Roman Emperor Aurelian. It is portrayed as a feminist state. Zenobia's husband had died in somewhat shady circumstance a few years before and since then she had reigned alone. In long philosophical discussions in this highly liberal empire the

women, led by the Queen herself, hold the upper hand at nearly every point. It is even rumoured that Zenobia herself is a Jew and very sympathetic towards Christianity. The narrator, also a genuine historical figure, a Roman Senator called Lucius Piso, goes to stay with a Palmyrene family and observes the coming war with the Romans. The daughter of the house is the leader of the Palmyrene cavalry, half of which consists of women. The masculine/feminine contrast is even used to differentiate the Palmyrenes (feminine, creative, peaceful, tolerant) and the Romans (masculine, dogmatic, warlike, monolithic). The modern reader, used to Victorian eulogies of imperialism and the subjugation of women, becomes increasingly puzzled by the book's tacit ideological assumptions.

The answer of course is William Ware was not a 'Victorian'. He was an American who, as the minister of the first Unitarian church in New York, was a member of the only religious group in the 19th century to give equal education to men and women. With this clue we have little difficulty in unravelling the rest of the code. Piso's view of the Romans burning Palmyra parallels the British burning of Washington in 1812. What is interesting is that Kingsley has taken all this on board in his novel and produced from it one of the most powerful and vivid female leaders of the 19th century. The exaltation of Hypatia's feminine virtues is quite deliberate, for this is, above all, a novel about sexuality. What is wrong with the Alexandrian church is that it is celibate and run by frustrated monks. The result has all the violence of a holy football team. Without the softening and civilising effect of women, for Kingsley, the Church is doomed.

We see this most powerfully in the tribulations of one of the book's two male heroes. Raphael Ben-Ezra is a Jew, a friend and pupil of Hypatia's who falls in love with Victoria, a young Roman Christian. Though he does not believe in his ancestral faith, he finds that he cannot, in all honesty, convert to Christianity simply because he would doubt his own integrity in so doing. In a long, soul-searching conversation with Synesius, one of the few married bishops of the early Church (and therefore one he can talk to) Raphael explains would do this for anybody else, and would do it for any other religion, but Christianity demands a purity of heart that looks into motives as much as action.

' ... I have been tempted a dozen times already to turn Christian: but there has risen up in me the strangest fancy about conscience and honour ... I never was scrupulous before, Heaven knows — I am not over scrupulous now — except about her. I cannot dissemble before her. I dare not look in her face when I had a lie in my right hand ... She looks through one — into one — like a clear-eyed awful goddess ... I never was ashamed in my life till my eyes met hers.'

'But if you really became a Christian?'

'I cannot. I should suspect my own motives. Here is another of these soul-anatomizing scruples which have risen up in me. I should suspect that I had changed my creed because I wished to change it — that if I was not deceiving her I was deceiving myself. If I had not loved her it might have been different: but now — just because I do love her, I will not, I dare not listen to Augustine's arguments, or my own thoughts on the matter.'⁹

Kingsley had read the German romantics and in such passages as this he probes the ethical demands of the new self-consciousness in a way that is as fascinating as it is (probably) unhistorical.

Yet Kingsley's insistence on the sexuality of self-consciousness is also the key to some of his weakest writing in the book. Egyptian Christianity (eventually to be purged by the stern desert creed of Islam) is doomed as part of a dying and corrupt Roman world. 'The Egyptian and Syrian Churches' he explains 'were destined to labour not for themselves, but for us.'¹⁰ 'Us' in the novel is from northern Europe and takes the form of a large boat full of Goths, on what the Americans would call 'R & R'. Having sacked Rome they are now on holiday in Egypt and they have commandeered a boat plus all the local dancing girls they could find and are running a kind of floating brothel cruise up the Nile to visit the Pyramids and see the other local sights. It is these Goths, huge, blond, child-like men, capable both of extraordinary ferocity and great kindness who are, according to Kingsley, the true future. They represent one of the strangest and (in retrospect) least attractive parts of Kingsley's theory of history — spelled out most fully in his later Cambridge lectures, *The Roman and the Teuton* (1864). For him, they may be pagan barbarians, but they are the torch of the future, which will bring a new vigour and vision to the effete world of the Mediterranean. Above all (except when indulging in a little local rapine, or carrying with them their own

floating brothel on a Nile cruise) they have a reverence for women and a belief in monogamy that will eventually find its true expression in North European Protestantism: especially Lutheranism and the Church of England.

Those wild tribes were bringing with them into the magic circle of the Western Church's influence the very materials which she required for the building up of a future Christendom, and which she could find as little in the Western Empire as in the Eastern; comparative purity of morals; sacred respect for women, for family life, law, equal justice, individual freedom, and, above all, for honesty in word and deed; bodies untainted by hereditary effeminacy, hearts earnest though genial, and blest with a strange willingness to learn, even from those they despised;¹¹

Only with this 'teutonic' understanding of the role of sexual experience as leading to religious will Raphael's prophetic vision of the Song of Songs be fulfilled. Left to itself all the Roman tradition could come up with to counter the 'utterly indescribable' sins of the pagan world was the hideously unnatural practice of monasticism. For Kingsley, it is no exaggeration to say that without a proper understanding of sexuality, there could be no proper understanding of the Bible. The divine grows only through the human; the flesh, sanctified, leads ultimately to the spirit.

At first glance, one could hardly have a greater contrast between Kingsley's philosophy and that of my next example, John Henry Newman. But there is more in common than one might expect. Behind both Newman and Kingsley there is a new self-consciousness that is also deeply erotic. Again, it is worth quoting Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion*: For him, the religious ground of our being stems from the fact that all sense-experience is holy. Before we can begin to analyse our own sensations there is an initial moment of total unity with all creation. The passage in which he attempts to describe this moment is a remarkable one, and it is worth paying attention to it in its entirety.

That first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception, before intuition and feeling have separated, where sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, before both turn back to their original position

— I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away. But I wish that you were able to hold on to it and also to recognise it again in the higher and divine religious activity of the mind. Would that I could and might express it, at least indicate it, without having to desecrate it! It is as fleeting and transparent as the first scent with which the dew gently caresses the waking flowers, as modest and delicate as a maiden's kiss, as holy and fruitful as a nuptial embrace; indeed, not *like* these, but it *is itself* all of these. A manifestation, an event develops quickly and magically into an image of the universe. Even as the beloved and ever-sought-for form fashions itself, my soul flees toward it; I embrace it, not as a shadow, but as the holy essence itself. I lie on the bosom of the infinite world. At this moment I am its soul, for I feel all its powers and its infinite life as my own; at this moment it is my body, for I penetrate its muscles and its limbs as my own, and its innermost nerves move according to my sense and my presentiment as my own. With the slightest trembling the holy embrace is dispersed, and now for the first time the intuition stands before me as a separate form; I survey it, and it mirrors itself in my open soul like the image of the vanishing beloved in the awakened eye of youth; now for the first time the feeling works its way up from inside and diffuses itself like the blush of shame and desire on his cheek. This moment is the highest flowering of religion. If I could create it in you, I would be a god; may holy fate only forgive me that I have had to disclose more than the Eleusinian mysteries.¹²

As so often with Schleiermacher, the language is as extraordinary as it is deliberate. This fleeting quality of immediate (that is, unmediated) experience represented by a 'maiden's kiss' and a 'nuptial embrace' not because of any metaphorical similarity, but because, he claims, it is *actually present* in them. But though, Schleiermacher insists, this is therefore not to be taken as imagery in any normal sense, the sexually charged nature of the examples chosen leads the reader on to what, if they are also *not* metaphors, must be among the most erotic accounts of religious experience ever recorded by a Lutheran pastor. If that sounds a feebly qualified statement, we need to recall just how erotic the Catholic mystical tradition, not to mention its pagan Greek precursors, could often be. Despite a rhetorical style which suggests he is freeing his

language from all traditional religious associations, Schleiermacher, for his own specific purposes, is drawing here on a very ancient system of erotic symbols for spiritual experience. As a former translator of Plato, he was well aware of the Socratic myth of the soul in the *Phaedrus* — which he believed was the earliest of the platonic writings, setting the pattern for the later ones.¹³

Newman's novel *Callista* was written at the express invitation of Cardinal Wiseman to reply to Kingsley's *Hypatia* with a rather more flattering portrait of the early Church. Kingsley's book had sold well — and would have done even better if it had not appeared in the same year as that runaway best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Callista*, like *Hypatia*, is a beautiful Greek maiden living in North Africa. She is not merely a practising pagan, but like *Hypatia*, she is also a *professional* pagan, in that she and her brother earn their living by making religious images. Like *Hypatia*, too, she is a genuine seeker after spiritual insight. When she discovers that Agellius, her suitor, and a nominal Christian, is more interested in her than his own religion she explodes with pent-up anger:

I had hoped that there was something somewhere more than I could see; but there is nothing. Here am I a living breathing woman, with an overflowing heart, with keen affections, with a yearning after some object which may possess me. I cannot exist without something to rest upon. I cannot fall back upon that drear, forlorn state, which philosophers call wisdom, and moralists call virtue. I cannot enrol myself a votary of that cold Moon, whose arrows do but freeze me. I cannot sympathise in that majestic band of sisters whom Rome has placed under the tutelage of Vesta. I must have something to love; love is my life.'

She was absorbed in her own misery, in an intense sense of degradation, in a keen consciousness of the bondage of nature, in a despair of ever finding what alone could give meaning to her existence, and an object to her intellect and affections.¹⁴

This is the voice of Kingsley's *Hypatia* as she begins to doubt her old certainties just before she is caught by the mob. It is also, of course, the authentic voice of romanticism, speaking of a kind of religious experience which, if it can be detected in Augustine's

Confessions, is largely dormant again thereafter until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

A persecution of Christians breaks out, and Callista makes the mistake of going to visit Agellius just as his house is about to be stormed by a mob. He has been forewarned and escaped, but she is caught, arrested, and thrown into prison as a suspected Christian. As a card-carrying pagan she could easily escape by the standard sacrifice to the Emperor, but instead, hardly knowing what she is doing, she accepts the false accusation made against her and declares that she is indeed a Christian. Unlike Kingsley's rape and massacre this is supremely a novel of inner consciousness and in Callista's slow acceptance of what she has falsely been accused of we have no problem in seeing Newman's own movement from being accused of being a Catholic to the point of becoming one. What is interesting about this is that since she discovers this in gaol largely by herself, and only receives the most sketchy instruction in her religion, what moves her is more like the Quaker 'inner light' than the teachings of the Catholic Church. Indeed, though she eventually dies a martyr's death and is promptly canonised, performs a few miracles after her death, and is integrated into the Catholic church there is curiously Protestant central theme running through the whole novel.

This is less a matter of Newman being (as his enemies quickly suggested) a crypto-Protestant, as a quality of the evolving self-consciousness that has been a central theme of this paper. We see it over and over again in the hundreds of 'religious novels' of the nineteenth century. What is at stake is the strange condition of mind of martyrdom itself. A martyr has to be able to defy his or her own culture totally, and to assert a kind of inner strength, an inner sense of identity, that is able to resist all the pressures put on it by the state. Such a quality of mind is, of course, most brilliantly displayed in St Augustine's *Confessions*, which is, arguably, one of the greatest constructions of identity ever produced. It is no accident, that the romantic period, seeking to discover the nature of personal identity and self-exploration, and to ground consciousness and the discovery of the world in such a quality of mind, should turn back to the Christian martyr as the supreme example of an inner consciousness so powerful as to stand out against its culture.

I want to finish now by dealing very briefly with a novel which has just come out. Since we have a conference dealing in

various ways with questions of postmodernity, it seems to me important to show how many of the themes I have talked about this morning were not confined to the nineteenth century, but that the romantic crisis is a continuing one to which we are still responding. Some of you may already have seen a new novel by a Norwegian novelist, Jostein Gaarder, called *Sophie's World*. Apparently already a best seller in Germany and Scandinavia, it is, we are told, under translation into twenty different languages including Chinese, Korean and Turkish. It is an extraordinary novel because it unwraps itself under a series of guises. At one level it is simply a history of philosophy. A fifteen year old girl gets a note through the post one morning saying "Who are you? How do you know about the world?" Over the next few days she receives a more letters from a mysterious personage who claims to be her 'philosophy teacher' but who refuses to identify himself. They start with the basic questions of pre-Socratic philosophy and continue until the present day. At the same time philosophy is being presented as a constant process of growing self-consciousness and inner exploration, dealing both with who are we, what are we doing? and outer exploration, what is the structure of the world? how does it work? what is matter? what is life? Though it is presented as being a history of philosophy, we should not of course forget that this is *our* story of philosophy. There are other stories of philosophy which other periods have told. An 18th century philosopher would have told a quite different history of philosophy and would have included different figures, for example, and no doubt a 21st century philosophy will rearrange the order and importance of philosophers once again.

At this level, this is a story for fifteen year olds to introduce them to philosophy and to make that boring and deadly subject a bit more palatable. We have seen hundreds of school texts books that run along this structure. The first cracks in this structure come with a certain creeping incorrectness in the plot. As we know, fifteen year old girls should not be encouraged to go rushing out to cabins in the middle of the woods at night to meet mysterious men whom they have never met just because they have sent them notes in their letter box saying, who are you? and what is the structure of the world? Gradually something even odder begins to happen. Among her other letters in the letter box, Sophie receives one saying 'Happy Birthday Hilda! I sent this note to Sophie for reasons you will understand, love Dad.' It was posted apparently

in the Lebanon, but has no postmark and no stamp. 'Who is Hilda?' asks Sophie, not unreasonably. A couple of days later a postcard is blown by the wind onto the kitchen window while she is washing up. It says, again, 'Happy Birthday, Hilda! love Dad.' Then, on the street, she sees a scrap of paper lying beside the rubbish bin that says 'Happy Birthday Hilda!' and is addressed, 'c/o of Sophie, The Street'. When she asks her philosophy teacher who Hilda is, and what is going on? he replies, 'I am not sure, but I think something unspeakably vulgar is going on'. She then proceeds to eat a banana. When she opens up the banana it has 'Hi Hilda! Happy Birthday!' written along inside the skin ... You see what is happening? At one level we are reading a story of the history of the triumph of human rationality. Superstition and magical explanation are being pushed to the background as our exploration both of ourselves and the world proceeds. But at the same time the plot of the novel is growing increasingly irrational. Every chapter is a lesson on the history of philosophy, and, at the same time, a story of growing impossible irrationality is beginning to unwind around it.

Now we all know about South American magical realism. In a Postmodernist world we are all happy to accept novels in which messages are written inside bananas. But no one so far has tried combining such techniques with histories of philosophy in the same novel. By the middle of the book the question of how Gorder is going to dig himself out of this hole becomes all-engrossing. Philosophers must ask questions; philosophers must not accept things for granted; even the most obvious things must be queried and a rational explanation sought. I am not going to spoil the book for you, but I will add that the reason why these notes can be written to Hilda, is that Hilda is, of course, also a character in the novel. The 'unspeakable vulgarity' that so infuriates the philosopher is that the author sends messages from one level of the novel to characters at another level, without the characters themselves knowing what is happening. The novel is, after all, a work of fiction — and, as I said at the beginning, highly subjective.

It is only a convention that creates fictional characters that we believe in as real people. We need to be reminded sometimes of the essentially fictional nature of fiction. Yet, at the same time, we should not forget the romantic idea that it is only through works of art — such as fiction — that we can construct reality. In the Book of Job, the ending hinges not on questions of justice or

suffering but on God's very unfair question about who is running the show anyway? He is, he points out, the author, as well as a character. To be romantic or post-romantic is to be all part of a great narrative. The exploration of consciousness that is going on in a work of fiction is also, at the same time, an exploration of consciousness that affects our individual lives and the way in which we react or explore the world.

To conclude then, I have tried to indicate some of the historical reasons, why we are gathered in this highly romantic manner here today to discuss the problems of the arts and literature-and to see why they have moved from being peripheral to a study of our world, to being absolutely essential. It should be clear that I emphatically reject John Carroll's notion that humanism is a monstrous historical aberration. On the contrary I see what he calls rather loosely 'humanism' as being absolutely essential to the story we are telling today. Only when the emphasis moves from trying to make sense of the objective universe to recognising our own inescapable subjectivity can we begin to come to terms with the world we actually live in. It follows that I see Modernism and Postmodernism as a quite natural and obvious outcome of the crisis of subjectivity provoked by romanticism. My third and final point, which I leave with you, is that I believe quite passionately that the future of religious studies lies in the better understanding of contemporary aesthetics.

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