

## THE MEANING OF MODERNITY

The title of this course *The Modern Age: Movers and Shapers* already poses a problem for us for it presupposes all sorts of things that will come into question in the course. In the first place, if it really is an AGE we should be able to date it, but that is notoriously difficult to do. For our purposes, we are starting in the 1760s when European writers began to spread new ideas that initiated a **movement** known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment sought to displace tradition and superstition and to replace religious and philosophical dogma with a **rational enquiry** into the way things worked and the ways that they could be improved in the **real world**. But two heroes of the Enlightenment were Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon who were part of the **scientific revolution** that took place in the 1600s. Newton's theory of gravity demonstrated conclusively that the earth wasn't the center of the universe and Bacon's scientific method seemed a much more useful way of interrogating nature and discovering its secrets than arguing about passages/interpretations in the bible. The political starting point and inspiration of many of these writers was the **glorious revolution** that took place in England in the mid 1600s and that forced government to represent the people. And if all of that doesn't make dating **modernity** difficult enough, many Enlightenment writers rediscovered **classical Greek and Roman authors like Herodotus, Plutarch and Cicero** and regarded Greek civilization as the most advanced. Some of the most *modern* writers of the period, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau even went so far as to argue that *ancient* Greek civilization was superior to anything the corrupt moderns could ever hope to produce.

And if that doesn't make dating the start of modernity difficult enough, it leaves out, or at least skirts around, an issue of maximum importance – the **development of the nation state**. You really can't have most of what we count as modern without a nation state. Consider that without a centralized authority structure, you could never get the development of a **market economy** because every region had its own rules and regulations with respect to trade. Without a centralized administration, you couldn't possibly get **efficient institutions** because you'd have too many competing jurisdictions. Without a centralized administration, you couldn't possibly get the **rule of law and the development of jurisprudence**. Now you need to put all of these developments together to get them just right over time to produce new modern *inventions* like **the rights of the citizen, the division of labour** and, most important to you probably, **the development of the individual self**. The development of all of these things in Europe took centuries, but most historians agree that an essential starting point was the rationalization of the state that took place in England in the mid 1500s under the Tudors. That's why some scholars of politics like to refer to the 1500s as the beginning of the **early modern period**.

O.k., so I'll try not to piss you off by suggesting that dating the beginning of the modern period is no easy task. We can't say, for example, that everyone woke up one morning in 1763 and realized: "Hey, we're modern now. Aren't we cool?" But I'm not through making your life difficult, and turning your brain into mush, just yet. What about the *end* to modernity? Let's assume for our purposes that **modernity becomes a widespread 'movement' at least among Enlightened writers in and around the 1760s**, then when

did it end? Ooooooh, that's a toughie. And not just because it is difficult to assess from a scholarly point of view, but because many of us like to think of ourselves as modern and "with it" as opposed to the past when people didn't "get it". How many of you think of yourselves as modern? How would you define modern then? Isn't the term modern something like what Alice encounters in Wonderland, *whatever people living today want it to mean*. But surely then, it loses all of its analytical meaning.

A group of writers in the 1970s, mainly in France where they still like to think about these issues, began to argue that, for serious people, modernity was over, kaput, collapsed. Nobody believed in modernity any more. These writers called themselves **postmodernists** and they had a couple of major points that they wanted to advance. Their points are fascinating because they try to grapple with what is modern and what is not. First, the modern belief that **life is meaningful and that human beings can grasp it** is sheer nonsense. What we have today is a *proliferation of meanings* that no one will ever agree upon. Second, the modern naivety you could **mould and develop the world according to reason** has been exploded by the fact that science and technology have led us into a quagmire where **we are no longer progressing but destroying ourselves**. Third, the modern faith in reason and cosmopolitanism was a con, a technique by which **European capitalism colonized the world in its own image**. Fourth, the world is not rational and people are not rational either, but **irrationalism especially in the form of power is ubiquitous (it is everywhere – both inside and outside of us)**. Fifth, the modern person or individual, we once thought was heading somewhere is a **fragment of imagination**. There is no longer any **coherent personality in the modern subject, the consumer, the stroller, and the tourist who wanders from one distraction to another**. In fact, in so far as there is anything that we can term a modern personality, it is a **thing that is always 'reacting' to stimuli from outside and preparing itself to 'move on' from one obsession, one task, one job, and one relationship to another**. Sixth, the search for some ideal of happiness and community, that drove and was the blind faith of the moderns, is a false utopia. **Contentment is a dead end; in a world of change, happiness consists at best of 'moments'**. Seventh, personal rebellion and social revolution will never change anything; **the only escape from apathy is to suck whatever you can out of your relationships** and any pleasures that the game of life throws your way. Eighth, genuine communication and mutual understanding is impossible and actually a mask for domination. **The lesson is that the only alternative to loneliness is a cultivated superficiality**. Finally, **all that we are left with in the postmodern world of globalization is the permeation of differences** that can be embraced but never overcome.

Now, these postmodern writers like Bauman, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and others have some incredibly 'cool' things to say. Your generation can learn a lot, for example, about why you can never find a *home* in your community or in a permanent relationship, unless you are willing to compromise. You'll get a sense of why you are frustrated with parents who think that life, love and occupation are so simple and straightforward. You'll understand better why you are obsessed with sucking up as much mass media stimuli as you can. You'll discover why new age visions of fitness never end as you seek those experiences that are stimulating but somehow never satisfying. You'll wish you could be

*nostalgic* but for what? Genuine nostalgia for things lost you can never have, and will just make you unhappier because you can't have. Better to look for happiness in a now that incorporates nostalgia as part and parcel of contemporary culture. The icon for postmodern life is MADONNA, who changes her image before it can get stale, who figures out what the next wave of change could be, and who draws from the past whatever she thinks will get her attention. Madonna is exceptional in her longevity. In postmodern life, the best most people can hope for is 15 minutes of fame. Since postmodern life lacks substance, at least you can keep up with the style.

I've taken a little longer in describing postmodernism than I might have, not because I think the postmoderns are right, but because their analysis at its best attempts to define modernity. The definition may not be one that you completely agree with at the end of the course – **i.e. that modernity is all about European civilization deploying reason to dominate the globe and forcing people into conventional relationships, nuclear families, bureaucratic institutions, and many other limiting 'iron cages' that keep us from exploring the rich diversity of possibilities that are available to us.** But it reminds us that terms like *modernity* are contested and not simply academic concepts. Concepts are very important, but they have to have *meaning* for you if they are to become *meaningful* for you in your life. Even if you consider yourself to be on the side of the *moderns* versus the *postmoderns* at least you need to examine yourself and your life, and, as Socrates suggested, the unexamined life is not worth living. Well, perhaps that's a bit too strong, I prefer the 'crap detector' metaphor. If you haven't thought about some of these things, you end up buying into whatever crap is thrown your way; essentially you build your personality out of 'crap'. If you do this, you end up being covered with it.

Just as I pointed out that dating the beginning of *modernity* is difficult, it also is difficult to date *postmodernity*. The major hero and inspiration for most postmodern theorists is a guy named Friedrich Nietzsche. But he wrote his most famous works during the 1870s and 1880s, which is over a hundred years ago. Nietzsche contributed to an intellectual crisis of modernity at the end of the nineteenth-century known as *fin de siècle consciousness*. If many of the ideas that the postmodernists claim to be new are over a century old, then doesn't it make more sense to suggest that modernity is not cut and dried but that, in the words of Marshall Bauman, had its own quite remarkable capacity for self-criticism and reflection. Modernity represents a *maelstrom* of thinking, experience and thinking about experience that is anything but simple. It is in fact, to use a big word that you will learn more about as the course goes on, **modernity is a dialectical age where you can find many opposites and even more paradoxes. It might be better to describe the world we live in today as 'late modern' rather than postmodern to the extent that a clear alternative has not emerged.**

One of the problems that I personally have with postmodernist thinking is that it obscures important structural issues – the dominant status and power of science, capitalism and technology in the world we share. Moreover, while highlighting the power of past colonizers, it doesn't have a lot to say about the oppression of rich countries and rich classes over their poorer counterparts today. For all their embracing of the *death of the subject* in their writings, it is difficult to discover real or even imaginary strategies for

liberation. Combined, postmodernist writings tend to be uncritical of the world in which we live and individually, many of them reinforce apathy. For all their failings, the writings of the modern age (now loosely defined, but you know what I mean) provide strategies for rebellion. The one thing that I think that postmodern writing does capture is that there is a different *flavour* to the lived experience of many people since the demise of the ideals of sixties rebellion and revolution. It is no longer just a few intellectuals that feel that modern life is not meaningful. Many of your generation are searching for a meaning but without much hope that they will find one, except in creating a more meaningful life for themselves. So, to use postmodernist language, the *difference that makes a difference* is that today the majority of people have lost hope in either a heaven to come or a heaven on earth.

One of the difficulties in teaching a course like this, especially with students who come from more traditional backgrounds, is that some aspects of the modern *maelstrom* and the postmodern or late modern *malaise* will appear foreign to you. In fact, I'd be surprised if many of you weren't straddling traditional community, modern relationships, and postmodern insecurities all at once. Also, many of you will be navigating all of those terrains with the help of religions, that are now can be quite theologically and culturally diverse, as in the conflicts between the various *peoples of the book*: Jews, Muslims and Christians. For those, for example, who regard the Bible or the Koran or any other text as the 'answer' to life's problems, I am going to need to beg your indulgence and command a degree of obedience. This course deals with the mentalities of modernity. Many 'modern' individuals embrace religion as an issue of choice and a matter of hope and as something open to interpretation. While they tend to find solace and direction in religious values, they tend to tease them out from modern secular concerns.

**Modernity is secular, not in the sense that it necessarily denies religion, but that it pushes religion into the background of life as it is experienced whether rationally or emotionally. Modern people (that is not to say 'good' or 'bad' or to impute a value to modernity) do not interpret religion dogmatically or apply it decisively to problem solving. In any case, it would be difficult to do so in a modern age where such differences of religious opinion apply. Therefore, in your writing and discussion in this course about modernity, you should avoid using religion as an analytical tool unless it is relevant and you should park any religious dogmatism at the classroom door. Such views will not only negate conversation but will also obscure our exploration of the various thematics that incorporated this complex thing we call modernity.**

By now, it should be obvious that you are no longer in high school ("We are not in Kansas anymore Toto") and that much of your learning is going to involve ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox. **Modernity is a complex clustering of concepts** that different "movers and shapers" have interpreted differently; dictionary or Wikipedia will not help you here. You need to read, try to understand, and engage these concepts. Generally speaking, these concepts will be **combined within quite sophisticated theories**. You will not be familiar with many of these theories and concept clusters, so you have to give yourself time to absorb them. If you stay in humanities or the social sciences, by the time

you graduate, you will have much greater familiarity with them. But you will not make much progress if you don't read before you come to classes, and listen carefully in the lectures. One of the things that I dislike most about university education today is that students come to classes like postmodern consumers, either seeking entertainment or undigested information that they can repeat on an exam and get a lollipop in the form of a grade. It's not your fault; your high school classes and your entire social environment conspire in an attempt to keep you from thinking for yourself. But it's my job to teach you how to think. Otherwise, you'll spend the rest of your life like the scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz, whose theme song is "If I Only Had a Brain". At least if you have to live in a brainless society, you have the right to know for yourself that it's brainless.

Thinking is done with concepts. Concepts are joined together, and have been joined together differently by different thinkers -- **AND BY YOU!** -- to make sense of the *modern* world that we live in. There are lots of concepts in this course, so I'd like to introduce you to a number of them. Some will be more familiar to you than others. Those that are unfamiliar require a certain chewing up and digesting to make them part of your mental toolbox. It is the more seemingly familiar ones that tend to be dangerous because you will be too easily inclined to think that you already understand them. A concept like **change** for example seems rather obvious, but when unpacked and retooled within theories, can take on a very different function. That's why it is a good idea to play the mental game of *treating the familiar as strange* until you have a better handle on it.

Let's start therefore with this elusive *concept of change*.

## CHANGE

Modernity not only implies change and is obsessed with change. Modern thinkers attempt not only to make sense of the dramatic changes within which they are invariably placed, but the recognition of change means being able to shape life in order to make it better. Many modern thinkers mentally associate change with **progress** and they have an interpretation of how social improvements can be established. The name given to some of these schemes of social *improvement* is **utopia**, because modern thinkers were capable of conceiving words that were *radically* different from anything that existed in the past. In this sense, modernity is a **project to be attempted towards a future that can seem idealistic**. The key to change in the modern era, however, is that the typical starting point is not the **ideal** but the real. What seems to have emerged more recently is an idea that change is not only ubiquitous but a **value** in itself. We no longer ask the question *change for what* but we seem addicted to change for its own sake – everyone has to have the latest toy, the latest theory, and the latest fashion. Lots of people speak about *improving* themselves, but what they really seem to fear is looking at or accepting themselves.

## THE REALITY PRINCIPLE

What is important in any culture is *real* for that culture. What makes the modern obsession with reality singular and truly different is that reality refers to **the material**

**conditions of life that can be subjected either to observation or experiment.** Modernity is focused first and foremost on the real. Modernity's literature is obsessed with describing that reality painstakingly and often painfully because the real world often doesn't often fit our desires or hopes. What is more, a realistic view of change demonstrates that neither it nor modernity necessary move in a progressive direction. Realistic writers illuminate change as highly paradoxical and ambivalent and conflicted. The changes that get described by writers are initially external, in particular an entirely new **urban experience**. But the urban environment gives rise to a new kind of individual whose inner life is in some ways more meaningful than any external reality. Literary writers begin to explore an entirely new reality – that of the subconscious where reason is definitely not always in control.

## REASON

Although **imagination** is a critical and evolving concept within modernity, the initial impetus and assumptive principle behind progressive change is **rationality**. Reason is understood both as inductive (building on observation) or deductive (generating hypotheses) and its ideal type tends to be **science**. But reason should not be confined to science but to expanded society as a whole in order to change irrational or imperfect conditions of life. The key any description of reason is its **application to real life**. To be modern is to be 'excited' or to have 'faith' in the ability of reason to discover 'truths' that will change the world. This *hubris* or conceit about the power of reason and its truth may have been hegemonic as far as western civilization is concerned, but it has been contested since its inception.

## TECHNOLOGY

Modernity has a love-hate relationship with technology. Technology or *techne* is a way of **applying reason so as to improve life**. It's essential characteristic is the division of labour that makes it more productive. Technology, and the associated division of labour, has the power to make the future promising and to make what might appear *utopian* a real historical possibility. But from the early writings of modernity, there is present a fear of technology unleashed, i.e. that it will enslave workers. Adam Smith felt that the division of labour would turn wage labourers into unthinking machines. Karl Marx urgently described the *alienation* of an entire class of people who did not reap the benefits of technology. And, as technology advances, it is no longer only the workers who are oppressed. The demands of a technological society, contribute to the *iron cage* in which many of us find ourselves disempowered today.

## CAPITALISM

Modernity is not the same thing as capitalism. Modernity is also conceptually compatible with socialism. Moreover capitalism is not, and never was, a pure market ideology, having been contaminated fairly early on by the efficiencies of corporate hegemony. Nevertheless, **the modern world is inconceivable without the liberation of capitalism**

**that put technology into motion and ensured the dynamic of the division of labour.** In the early discussions of what it meant to be modern, capitalism played a central role since it offered the ability to sustain the growth that might lead to a specific utopia (where capitalism might no longer even be needed) or might even be self-propelling into perpetuity. Capitalism was no simple theory, involving a new interpretation of human beings as **creatures of rational self-interest and specialists of desire.** The contemporary marketplace is a market in desire; you and I can desire *anything*.

## THE INDIVIDUAL

Prior to modernity, and in some more traditional areas of the world today, the individual was not a *strong* concept, and not easily compatible with *laissez-faire* capitalism. This is because personhood was tied to community. Modernity is all about setting the economy and the individual free to discover his or her own **happiness.** But happiness now becomes a problem because it is (unlike the Greek idea of happiness) largely set free from a social setting. Moreover, it now becomes the individual's task to define personality for himself/herself. There is simultaneous liberation and anxiety, and the need for a new period of adolescence, in the discovery of *self*. Once let loose from its social cocoon, the self becomes an instrument and an issue of incredible complexity. Moreover, the rational self and its **project of happiness** is complicated enormously by the **discovery of the irrational self and its necessary unhappiness (i.e. Freud) within a rationally constructed society.** **Freud's thinking for some marks the demise of any rationally constructed utopia**

## UTILITY/UTILITARIANISM

How do you measure objectives in a secular world where heaven and hell have become backdrops to self-propelled behavior? The simple answer is to allow people to explore their own happiness, so long as they don't interfere with the happiness of others. The elegance of this definition of happiness as utility is that it conforms perfectly to the dynamic of capitalist individualism and its division of labour along the lines of interest and aptitude. The complicating factor, however, is that a complex capitalist society needs to be run in ways that are efficient. **Utilitarianism, defined by the eighteenth-century thinker Jeremy Bentham as the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" increasingly gets defined in a mechanistic and bureaucratic fashion.** The irony is that that utilitarianism as a system ultimately becomes capable of significantly limiting the freedom of the individual and the market.

## DEVELOPMENT

Modern life is about development and **the modern man** (or woman, but you'll see the problem with this alternative right way) **is a developer.** Modern meaning is defined in terms of **moving and shaping in ways that are progressive.** And, even in the absence of a utopia, modern people define themselves by accomplishing things, building things – the Donald Trump mentality. But **development is inherently tragic and ambiguous** as Goethe's famous character Faust demonstrates. In the end, everything you build will

need to be replaced because you can't stop development! And, when you build new thing, you necessarily destroy old things. You, and your society, can't easily avoid the nostalgia for the old and familiar in the exuberance of the new. **The developer begins with a dream, moves to execution that produces evil as well as good, controls financial and human resources to best advantage, but runs the risk of destroying his humanity in the process.** The relationships are ones of dominance, control and patriarchy in which the love of community and even romantic love are made subservient to the project. Living and breathing people must be sacrificed to change in the form of project management.. In the words of one York professor, "progress takes precedence over people". And, tragically, what began as a liberating conception of imagination often makes for human havoc in the real world of capital and politics. Moreover, it negates one's own humanity.

## UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Alongside and parallel to the concepts of development and progress come the more sinister notions of backwardness and underdevelopment. The sinister or dark aspect of development in the superiority that more advanced countries feel towards those that are underdeveloped and the colonial attitudes that hegemonic nations (more economically powerful) have towards those that are labeled as undeveloped. The countries whose intellectuals and politicians embrace and engage modernity the most are those that fear being left behind. **But the culture of underdevelopment or perceived backwardness creates quite peculiar anxieties and tensions because those are precisely the constituencies whose traditional social and cultural leadership feel threatened** (Spain); that try to force the pace of urbanization and industrialization (Russia): experience all the identity problems and nostalgia for the past associated with dramatic change (Germany); become preoccupied with who they are as national communities (Scotland; Quebec), and who tend to impose models of modernity in domains where they may not fit (India). Although perfectly understandable, it is misleading to simply divide the politics and culture of development along the lines of colonizer and colonized, rich and poor, literate and illiterate precisely because these divisions and associated tensions also exist *within* developed nations. Paradoxically, the insights and anxieties associated with perceived socio-economic backwardness can also stimulate a high degree of cultural development and a penetrating analysis of modernity as it certainly did with Russian (Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol) and Irish (Yeats, Joyce) and German (Goethe, Mann, Hesse) and Spanish (Pessoa) literature.

## REVOLUTION

The term and concept 'revolution' is not exactly new in the eighteenth-century. But its connotation became much more positive than in earlier periods when most people feared change. It began its modern life as a way of describing what modern science had achieved – a revolution in thought that explained the planetary motions in the universe and began a detailed examination of phenomena on the world. But the new consensus of revolution in the eighteenth-century was political, social and economic. The key writers, called *philosophes* believed that by communicating new ideas, you could fundamentally



change the way that people viewed society. You could bring the focus back down from some intangible heavens to the real world. The breakthrough was intellectual and implied the complete freedom to canvas new political, social and economic ideas without fear of religious or other reprisal. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the crucial revolution was the revolution of the mind. But as the term developed and gestated through the century, it took on a quite different and ubiquitous power. In the French and later European and North American environments, it was a captivating appeal to dramatic political change and/or separation. In economic life, in the nineteenth century it was used to describe and affirm the economic change established by factory production. Despite conservative reactions to revolutionary change during the nineteenth-century, the concept of revolution became almost synonymous with change as the dynamic of modernity. Changes to us that might seem gradual were swept up in a notion of revolution where “all that is solid melts into the air”. Thinking something makes it so. The nineteenth century has been caricatured as the Age of Revolution and we today hear paraded any new change in technology as a ‘revolution’.

## NATURE

The concept of nature is perhaps the most ambiguous in the lexicon of modernity. From a very early stage it adopts a paradoxical position. On the one hand, continuing but greatly intensifying the biblical tradition, nature is something that can be dominated, controlled and bent to one’s wishes. The secrets of nature are now opened up by science and available to technology. Nature also becomes a store of resources for capitalist accumulation, expenditure and production. **The exploration of human *nature* runs entirely parallel to this, as human resources can be divided, controlled, conditioned and manipulated in the interest of this accumulation and production. But, there is a completely different view of nature that emerges. In an important sense, nature substitutes in the mind of many for God and becomes, in a sense sacred.** Nature ordered in terms of agriculture also retains its classical pastoral and sentimental character. Now that nature’s *nature* (if I may put it this way) is open to exploration, the meanings of nature multiply and wild and austere nature is characterized as *sublime* and total alterity to puny and unimaginative capitalism. Finally, it is in the modern age, that writers and artists especially begin to reverse our consciousness of nature as something apart from us and, like Thoreau, to place us within nature and to equate our happiness, not with the control of nature, but the preservation of nature.

## THE PROJECTOR/THE PILGRIM/THE STOLLER

The defining character of the modern age is the projector. In intellectual and cultural life, it is the pilgrim who is walking in search of meaning. The modern university is conceptually constructed on the search for truth. One reason why many think that the modern university, and especially the Humanities curriculum is in ‘crisis’ or ‘ruins’ is because of the growing sense that meaning is multiple and truths are incompatible. **A new image increasingly usurps that of the *pilgrim searching for truth*. It is that of the stroller, the tourist, the passing visitor.** Postmodernity claims the *stroller* in the form of the consumer of sensations and the frequenter of malls (and life as a mall). But

that interpretation is already present in the modern period, especially in the writings of Baudelaire that we'll be looking at closely in this course. Increasingly, for many artists and writers with an artistic temperament, the painting of modern life is one of *moments and interludes of meaning*.

## THE CITY (URBAN SPACE)

Personality, discovering it or describing it, becomes increasingly elusive in the modern age after the initial euphoria of liberation. But it is made even more ambiguous by the **fact that there is a new and independent person on the scene that is quite distinct and that has a personality – namely the city.** The city is a site upon which many discourses settle – the discourse of development (urban building), the discourse of identity (strangers and others), the discourse of eroticism (the city at night and night life in the city). The city is much more than configurations in space, it has a unique character that penetrates all its inhabitants, and it can simultaneously be viewed as a horrid, impersonal monster and as an exciting, intoxicating adventure. The *stranger at the gate* can be feared as 'other' or entertained as 'difference'. The lure of the city for the young and all of its dangers are combined in the bustle of the street and its transformations from productive days to potentially erotic nights (I don't need to tell you that urban eroticism goes beyond sex do I? Being young, you probably view Toronto as exciting, alluring in its own right. The sexual potential is just a bonus). An interesting difference between the modern and postmodern city, according to the postmodernists, is that postmodern urban renewal implies *recycling and rehabilitation* of older forms rather than destruction and transformation.

## SOCIETY

You don't often get discussions of *society* in Humanities courses, partly because classical humanism precedes the emergence of a complex urban society and partly because the typical humanities approach to personal cultural development sets itself in opposition to an abstract and impersonal society. But during the nineteenth-century especially, it became clear to all observers that urban society was here to stay and that it was a much more significant development than urbanization. Society was becoming rationalized; most relationships were becoming more impersonal; life was much more complicated than before. Society, explored by writers as diverse as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim was not just a busy combination of people but an entity that seemed to have its own laws. Marx illuminated the emergence of new classes and the great conflict between capitalists and workers that would dominate most agendas for two centuries. Weber pointed to the development of bureaucracy in all so-called progressive societies, and the way it locked each and every one of us, both capitalists and workers, into an iron cage. Durkheim enthused about the remarkable division of labour in a complex society that made everyone depend on each other; at the same time, he pointed out that complexity complicated life for some and left others behind, resulting in something he called anomie or lack of belonging and that made urban centers *suicidocentric zones*. And even Sigmund Freud, explicitly and implicitly, simultaneously signified the erotic and repressive nature of life in modern society. Once people started talking about

something called society in such complex analytical ways, it was clear that some substantial differences were crystallizing, even if the great thinkers of modernity disputed which were most critical.

## COMMUNITY

Society is a complex concept that tries to make sense of what is *modern* and distinguishes what is significant within this new domain where human beings are more autonomous but also more anonymous, more interconnected but also more *estranged*, more personally liberating but also more alienating. Paired dialectically with this concept is another concept – **community**. The term *community* is not a given, although we often speak of traditional communities today. The term community was really an invention of the nineteenth century as a way of criticizing the impersonality of society. As distinct from an anonymous society, a community was a place where everybody knows your name. As distinct from a society of *strangers* this was a network of belonging or attachment. As distinct from a place where personality is to be discovered and relationships can be transitory, this is a place where identity is not a problem and relationships are permanent. **It is important to understand that *community* -- this site of belonging -- is not necessarily a realistic portrayal of traditional groupings of people but a modern invented concept used to criticize what is wrong with impersonal, mechanical and bureaucratic society.** In the nineteenth-century, it often got identified with the rural village and with medieval society, not viewed realistically but through the eyes of **nostalgia**. For many people today, equally nostalgically, community is associated with an earlier and simpler time, when social roles were more fixed, when you knew your neighbours, and you didn't need to keep adjusting to change – in America for example the world of Andy Griffith's *Mayberry* or *Father Knows Best*.

## CULTURE/CULTIVATION

Two other intertwined dialectical concepts that are *invented* by the modern age are *culture* and *cultivation*. In the eighteenth-century, when you talked about culture or cultivation you always meant *horticulture* or growing things. **By the early 1800s, artists and intellectuals who felt alienated by modern society were using culture and cultivation in a quite new way to condemn a society perceived as mechanical and materialistic and to describe the development and nurturing of a *holistic* personality that was superior to, or at least inoculated against, the new barbarism of materialism.** This is a new idea of culture in opposition to what is wrong in society and it creates a new role for the **artist as critic**. Closely associated with this view of culture is that of the **artist as genius** a concept that emerges first in association with the division of labour in modern society that allows some individuals to develop and display their unique or special talents. But the concept of genius soon detaches itself from modern society and is conceived by artists and intellectuals as something that cannot possibly draw its resources from modernity but denotes a special character or **spiritual quality**. This kind of thinking used to predominate in Humanities courses.

## LOVE

Love is one of the most fascinating concepts associated with modernity. The language or codification of love has been developing since the beginning of western culture and it has parallels in other cultures, particularly Persian. **But the kind of love that we associate with modernity is a very distinct kind of animal and its conceptualization is closely intertwined with individualism.** First and foremost, modern love is romantic because the lovers idealize one another, affirm each other's uniqueness, and create their own little unassailable domain to protect each other from outside conceptions. Second, modern love is inherently and fundamentally a critique of and a refuge from the selfish and materialistic nature of the world outside the *home* with or without its white picket fence (a favourite North American image of contented domesticity). Third, modern love is *nuclear* and looks in upon itself (and immediate offspring) for the most significant meanings in life. Fourth, modern love puts all kinds of pressure on individuals to simultaneously grow/develop but to maintain the intensity of the relationship. Love is the place that we have to do this because love is the most intensely meaningful social space in modern life (it was not always so, and is not so in some societies today). Fifth, because modern love in the West is overwhelmingly *sexual relationship* that usurps other kinds of friendships and communal/kinship relationships, it places a lot of intensity and discovers a lot of tension within the sexual act and its preparation. Eroticism moves to the center of the love relationship and sex becomes the obsession/fixation of modern society. Even when it appears to be repressed and its needs silenced, as in the Victorian era, it is quite simply pervasive. For all of these reasons, love has become a serious problem for today's change oriented and consumerist society.

## ALIENATION

Alienation is a concept that has a rich and quite complicated history in the modern age. Adam Smith and Karl Marx used it to describe the feelings of foreignness and antipathy of workers who are engaged in continuous, mindless, repetitive mechanical tasks. Workers become alienated from their labour in the ways that rural workers (who worked in nature) and craftspeople (who created satisfying objects) did not. In the case of Marx, alienation was all the more complete because work was used by one class (capitalists) to oppress another (workers or proletarians). But alienation takes on an entirely different meaning with respect to the artist as critic of modern society. **The artist is, and must necessarily be, alienated from a modern society that does not conform to the values of beauty, spirit, uniqueness and sublimity.** The artist feels that he or she cannot belong to a society and economic marketplace that always attempts to corrupt genius into prostituting themselves in the market. There are lots of examples of this conception of artistic genius in the modern age, but the highest profiled examples these days are those of rock stars who *sell out* after they become successful.

## GUILT

If the stroller in the metaphorical city has the anxiety as well as the intoxication of any *voyeur*. As Freud suggested, modern society confronts the problem of guilt in ways that more traditional societies did not. In fact, guilt has replaced sin but is much more

difficult to deal with. Since we are now responsible for ourselves and for rationally choosing moral behaviour, whether on emotive or rational grounds, many of us no longer have religious totems, confessionals or personal relations with God that offer 'solutions'. Modernity's search for ethical and psychological expertise (ethical theories and psychological therapies) has not proved a satisfying substitute for religion. **Liberating oneself from social structures means accepting responsibility for all aspects of one's behaviour; and that implies guilt.** The eroticism of the metaphorical city leaves us alone with our temptations. Some postmodernists might suggest that guilt is a nonsensical concept in our age of diversity and multiple meanings, but one aspect of modernity that we might not wish to get rid of is that acute sense of responsibility that seems to necessitate feelings of guilt. It is a bit scary imagining what a completely guilt free postmodern person might be capable of.

## BARBARISM

From its earliest emergence from the cocoons of the nation state, modernity was obsessed with barbarism. Thomas Hobbes' conception of the nation state was a shocking alternative to the state of nature where barbarism dominated, blood flowed, and a 'dark age' overpowered both reason and civilization. The Enlightenment writers also stereotyped the 'dark ages' fanaticism ruled. Many interpreters of modernity have commented on the fact that all of its positive features imply an **underground where irrationality rules and always seeks to impose itself.** Leaving aside for a moment the European wars and the horrific Holocaust in World War II, the 'dark side' of modernity is its ability to target various constituencies as dangerously barbaric. Patriarchal males see signs of degeneracy in *hysterical* and emotional women; the dominant upper classes – first aristocratic and then bourgeois (middle class) impute barbarism and the decay of civilization to a dangerous working class; and of course European colonizers justify imposing their dominance and economic control of other nations by such definitions of barbarity. In addition, as Foucault and others have described, the entire apparatus of modernity (in schools, clinics, asylums) was aimed at identifying and either eradicating or isolating instances of barbarism, labeled as such by an entire host of newly created *experts*.

But that's just one aspect of the life of the concept of barbarity in modern life. In the cultural domain, in the artistic discourses of culture, cultivation, beauty and the life of the spirit, barbarity is precisely the inner dynamic of modern society. **The modern age is addicted to a mechanistic and soulless definition of growth; the modern age puts capitalists in charge, who have not other quality than that of money making; the modern age does not know how to create, it only knows how to profit. Those characteristics displayed by the "flies of the marketplace" make modernity itself barbaric.** The favourite name for modern society among nineteenth-century British writers was the world of the *Philistines* (after the barbaric tribe bested by the Israelites in the bible).

## IMAGINATION

The changing concepts of the imagination provide a map, cartography, of modernity. At first, the imagination appears linked to reason, but increasingly it becomes a symbol of irrational and the 'other' of reason, at best a place where reason can find new intellectual fodder to digest, control and dominate. The notion that the constructs of reason themselves are part and parcel of imagination was clearly evident in the writings of David Hume, but was quickly and neatly closed over by the essentially rationalistic categories of Immanuel Kant. Don't mind the big names and ideas, the point here is that a split soon emerged in modernity between reason and imagination that bifurcated the commentators on modern life. The romantics used imagination as a weapon to condemn the mechanistic and philistine (barbaric) character of industrialization. Academics, at first in Germany but soon all over Europe and North America, began to promote the cultivation (like a plant) of imagination and to offer it as an antidote to bourgeois reason. Artists retreated from capitalist, industrial, bureaucratic society to become critics of society. While occasionally they discovered excitement in the modern world and could really only thrive in its sophisticated urban environment, their primary role was one of criticism and condemnation. **Culture, artistic and intellectual, became either a condemnation of modernity or a mechanism for transcending its reality. The artist retreated into a metaphorical garret – a superior reality.**

## THE SUBCONSCIOUS

The discovery of the subconscious provided very different analytical domains for the therapist and the artist. While the Romantic artist could derive some imaginative sustenance from the liberated individual and wild nature, these powerful resources were not easy to sustain against a mechanistic, rationalistic social reality. The romantic artist is a short-lived literary type except in university English Departments. **But the subconscious is a real discovery and offers a genuine human counterpart to society. Modern literature begins with sentimentalism and romanticism, but its characteristic genre and trope is the novel and the paths within the mind.** The *road interior* is simultaneously a real road and a largely unmapped interior. The journey of the writer as imaginary but realistic chronicler of consciousness allows for a myriad of directions that offer not only humane and humane insights, but also dangerously erotic escapades that also speak to who we are. The novel is the modern literary instrument par excellence. Its methodology is at once highly individualistic (each consciousness is unique) and communicative (the reader must explore the 'other' in a dialogic fashion). What's interesting about the novel is that the foundation or 'ground' for dialogue is not reason but 'reasons' that can take many shapes but are always to some extent sympathetic (i.e. emotive). What's fascinating is that the shape of this dialogue does not require a plot or even a narrative to be effective. It is this dialogue of difference, but bridging difference, that allows the novel to transcend both the modern and postmodern label.

## MODERN DEATH

Death is the one human universal that cannot easily be understood or brushed away. Religious and traditional societies dealt with death in the form of an afterlife connected by an umbilical cord to the present. Modern life positively seeks to deal with the

problem of death by affirming the project of life, by searching for truth, overall by **affirming humanity as a substitute for God**. Modern life negatively seeks to deal with death by **scientific and medical discoveries that eliminate unnecessary deaths and potentially extend life indefinitely**. But these strategies are not successful in eliminating death from the modern horizon and, in fact as the search for truth and meaning run into problems, **death as the termination of a life of very ambiguous meaning looms large on the modern horizon**. The discussion of the meaning of life in terms of death (implicit or explicit) is a fascinating way of exploring the modern mind at both its most optimistic and its most pessimistic.

## MORALITY

The modern age is/was not only a search for truth as meaning, but it was a search for *universals*. That seems to have been completely exploded in our late modern world of multiple meanings and do-it-yourself (DIY) morality. **By the second half of the nineteenth-century, however, writers on the continent were already assessing modernity fundamentally as the loss of moral meaning**. That's what Nietzsche meant, for example, when he suggested that God is dead. Of course, this was primarily an intellectual reaction but it contributed to some very great if pessimistic literature like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In order to appreciate the modern age, however, you need to understand two things that haven't really ended yet. First, the search for moral certainty has been ongoing and continues to inform ethical debates today (some of which are undecipherable). Second, although anxiety about the proliferation of ethical viewpoints continues, there remains considerable anxiety about this uncertainty, and a desire for clear ethical answers. Students continually ask me for answers that I simply cannot give them. Thus, the discussion of morality saturates modern discourse and is today even more pressing as modern institutions seem utterly incapable of reinforcing moral values.

## CHARISMA

Some might think it strange that I include this concept in the vocabulary of modernity, but I have a pretty good reason. Whenever there is uncertainty, whenever people want clear answers to unclear situations, there is a danger of charisma usurping not merely reason, but reasonable dialogue and human interaction. This is a fixture of modern life and it shows up most clearly in the choice of political and cultural leaders. It not only shows up in this choice, but it obscures the difference between the two. **Modern leaders have increasingly become actors, and actors have become political leaders**. When they can't sufficiently exchange personalities or operate in tandem. Modern political leadership has increasingly become a matter of image, sound bites, slogans and photo ops. 'Star' quality is more important than competence. Some would argue that this is a postmodern development, but the rise to power of Adolph Hitler suggests that it is a quintessentially modern development.

I started a new paragraph here because I want to make a point about what university education is becoming in our late modern period. More and more, students regard themselves as consumers of a product that they are paying for. Leaving aside the issue of

whether or not they really pay the costs, university professors find themselves increasingly being forced to entertain or accommodate students. In some postmodern circles, it is easy to relinquish responsibility for educating mall rats and abdicating the role of teacher. While I don't think that there is any absolute 'truth' I can teach you, I don't agree with education as a commodity and learning as consumption. As your teacher, I am neither a tourist nor a stroller. I am a pilgrim on a pilgrimage. If you want to go on a pilgrimage without any guarantee of finding a home, then we can walk together for a while. If not, why not take any number of courses where you can window shop comfortably.

## VIOLENCE

At the heart of modern life and modern responsibility lies the issue of power. **Modernity accepted the challenge of changing the world and trying to make it better, but it was successful in hiding from itself the violence that it did to others – women, workers, the colonized.** When I say modernity was successful at hiding from itself, I mean just that. I don't think most modern men and women were *deliberately* exploiting or oppressing others. The real question that you want to ask yourself, given that any attempt at any kind of dialogue or society potentially wounds or lacerates, is whether you yourself want to abdicate responsibility for creating a better world by simply being a critic? Do you want to abdicate from modernity or accept the fact that in any choices that you make, you will be operating within the poles of good and evil, and that violence is inherent in life? Maybe, the best we can do is try to understand it and minimize it. **The modern age has much to apologize for in the violence that it has done to the other and the different from its conception, but do those who criticize modernity themselves accept responsibility for their own violence, including the violent tricks that they play on the dead by labeling all modernity as corrupt?**

I want to end with a word or two about the first course reading *On Crimes and Punishments* by Cesare Beccaria, an eighteenth-century Italian writer. Beccaria was a very bright person of middle rank. If you were bright but not related to anyone powerful in the eighteenth-century, you had to try to promote yourself. Beccaria wanted to get into the magistracy of province in Italy and so he wrote a book to get noticed. But it wasn't like today in the eighteenth-century at the beginning of the modern age. Today, people seem to like new ideas or at least they pretend to. In Beccaria's time, especially in a place like Italy, it was dangerous to write a book advocating change. And Beccaria's book, which seems to be just about crimes and punishments, is a 'revolutionary' and 'brave' little book because it calls for a huge change in the way things are done. Instead of simply following tradition or reinforcing unjust power relations, Beccaria wants you to begin constructing a more rational and humane world.

Beccaria shows you what these 'young philosophers' wanted, to create a unified nation with a unified legal system that treated everyone equally and fairly. He's one of, if not the first, to suggest that the principle for organizing society is, not to reinforce hierarchical relations, but to create the "greatest happiness of the greatest number". I want you to imagine this guy, looking a world where everything is chaotic, where people



are locked up and tortured without good reason, where everyone thinks that the way you control crime is by bullying people into orderly behaviour. He sees this world clearly and yet he can imagine a better world. He's not perfect; he wants a job for himself and his friends; he wants power; and he's well aware that the society he's creating is completely new and a huge deviation from a traditional religious society. But he's willing to take the risk to advocate a new society.

Beccaria writes at the cusp of modernity, when those who claimed to be modern were confident that they were going somewhere, *somewhere better*. Change for him is a good thing, just as long as it is done with reason. His hope is for a more reasonable society, where people will be more humane and more happy. He has an agenda in so far as he wants to manipulate people into doing what is good for them. He's not worried about alienation, the loss of community, or the personal guilt that comes to characterize the age. That's what makes him such an optimistic guy.

He's probably a patriarchal male; he probably doesn't concern himself much about working people who've been working forever; and his attitude towards the rest of the world may be highly ethnocentric. More than that, he's clearly a bureaucrat who is interested in order at least as much as humanity. He's undeniably modern, since you will agree with a lot of what he says, but most of the people who lived at the time wouldn't. What do you think of him? Do you admire him? Do you believe that a better and more orderly society is possible? Try to put yourself back into his world and ask if you could have done better.

## THE AGE OF IMPROVEMENT

### The Old and New Regime

Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* is an almost perfect introduction to both the movement known as the Enlightenment and to the modern age. Despite any peculiarities in his eighteenth-century, he speaks directly to concerns, issues and a program that we understand. Beccaria is first and foremost a **reformer** who wants to change a society that he believes is backward. What is the European society – the Old Regime -- that Beccaria interrogates and condemns as backward?

- It is based on **privileges** that allow certain groups of people to manipulate the system for their own private interests.
- It is guided on **tradition and opinion** rather than an in depth understanding of the way society works.
- It is dominated by **superstition and fanaticism** rather than real practical intelligence.
- Moreover, the so-called *intelligence* that prevails and that interferes with reform is a **hodge-podge of religious views, moral platitudes, vested interests, and more generally confused thinking.**

This is the world that Enlightened writers wanted to change. In its place, they wanted to construct:

- A nation of **equal citizens with rights under law.**
- An **integrated political society based upon reason.**
- A modern **secular society** in which the **public good and private interests were connected.**
- A society governed by **as few principles as possible and ones that any intelligent person should be able to understand.**

That's what Beccaria is all about. Writing in eighteenth-century Italy, he needed to be realistic. One of the main impediments to **rational progress** is the Church. You can't piss off the Roman Catholic Church, or your book will be banned (put on the Index) and you yourself will be banished. So, although he criticizes religion, he does it *sotto voce* (softly) always saying that religion in general enables social formation and that the Christian religion is proved by the divine testimony of the bible and supported by miracles. But he makes it perfectly clear that most of the history of Christian Europe after the Greeks and Romans, what he refers to in section XLII as the "second epoch"

constituted the **dark ages** from which modernity was only now emerging. And he's certainly no democrat because he knows that the only way that you are going to get **real progress** is by having an **enlightened despot in charge**. His book is designed to increase control from the top over an unruly and misguided society.

Apart from having to be judicious, he's a pretty courageous warrior of the mind playing a dangerous game. He's one of the *philosophes* or practical philosophers who are attempting to put Europe on a new path. His battle flag is **knowledge** (knowledge secularized) and his motto is **liberty to discuss, discover and apply the "truth"**. But that's easy to say, after all, isn't everyone interested in the truth? In order to really appreciate Beccaria and the assumptions of the Enlightenment you have to ask yourself quite particular truth questions. You have to ask yourselves *modern* truth questions.

### **Inventing Society and the Individual**

What do I mean by modern truth questions? Modern truth questions begin with an analysis of two concepts that the Old Regime didn't have much interest in. The first and most overriding of these is **society**. The modern society they were talking about was synonymous with the **centralized nation state**. When Enlightened writers talked about reform and improvement, most of them meant the nation. And the nation in question was a republic, not in the sense of a democratic republic rather than a monarchy, but a **state situated in real historical time and in competition with other states**. The nation state was simultaneously an **economic, political, and legal entity**. Traditional countries are characterized by different customs, dialects, regional habits loosely governed by conventions. But **modern society**, and this is overwhelmingly true of Beccaria's concept of society, is a **contract between individuals**. The primary relationships are no longer traditional, regional or customary. You'll notice that Beccaria is highly critical of *families* especially families that think themselves apart from or above the nation. The modern relationship *par excellence* is between the individual and the state or society. And this calls for entirely new definitions of what you mean by the critical dominating concepts of modernity – the individual or the *self* and the state or *society*.

Beccaria continually refers to this thing called society doesn't he? And, although his primary topic may appear to be the legal code, his approach is completely characteristic of a social or political scientist. He's not interested in knowing everything about society; he would consider the concept of an *information society* as worthless because it would simultaneously tell you everything and nothing. What he and other enlightened writers are concerned about, even if they disagree, are the **principles underpinning this thing called society**. Most people take society for granted, or they cling to the ideas that they've learned about society. These people for Beccaria are ignorant. They have no idea what society is all about; all they have is a set of prejudices that they cling to and try to impose upon others. But Beccaria and the *philosophes* want to understand what really underpins society, when you cut away all the opinions, religious and regional values and nonsense that most people believe in. For Beccaria, **society is a contract**. Quoting Hobbes, but not needing Hobbes' definition of human nature as vicious, Beccaria

suggests that, whether they know it or not, **people join all societies from the most primitive to the most modern because of self-interest.**

Now, we need to stop and think about this for a minute. Most, but not all, Enlightenment writers would agree with Beccaria on this issue of society as a contract. But what is important here is the methodology. Beccaria is deploying reason to discover the **governing principles and essential underpinnings of society** and by the term *society* he clearly means modern society. He is willing to put his discovered principles and associated arguments into the public arena so that they can be debated and so that intelligent people can decide for themselves whether they agree or not. Knowledge is not longer to be hidden away in secret, or decided by religious or legal experts, it has to conform to **the reason or common sense that everyone has.** What really distinguishes Enlightened reasoning, however, is that, like Science, it does not multiply or complicate causes but **it always searches for the simplest and most universal principles possible.**

Let's say we accept Beccaria's principle that society is a contract. Then we are pushed to accept related principles that will lead to quite precise conclusions. A **contract is typically an agreement of convenience or self-interest between individuals.** If society is an agreement between individuals, then all of a sudden, individuals and their self-interest become equally as important to the equation as society. The first premise that you have to accept is that individuals are the essential building blocks of society, not families or kinship groups. Second, you need to understand that society entirely and absolutely depends on conforming to the self-interest of the individual. A likely corollary of this is that **individuals are born free or have liberty as a 'natural right'.** They sacrifice some of that liberty because it is in their self-interest to do so. People who simply follow their own self-interest outside of society will find themselves inconvenienced in any number of ways. So, they make a contract. Now, the key question is – what's the nature of that contract, understanding that any laws that you might choose to create will be entirely self-defeating unless they reinforce the natural character of men and women and the rationale for association? Beccaria argues that the contract must be based on self-interest; but what is self-interest. In a traditional Greek society, self-interest means leading a balanced or the *good* life. In a religious society, it might mean keeping your eye on God's will. As a modern writer, Beccaria defines self-interest completely in terms of **happiness.** And who is the best judge of happiness, why of course you will think that it is the individual who chooses to enter into the contract.

Look at how far Beccaria has come on the basis of these principles. He's essentially defined the modern world as a place where individuals seek their own happiness in a society that is free from religious or dogmatic control. But he's not finished yet, by a long shot. He's an architect of modern society. Modern society still needs to be designed in such a way as to ensure the ability of everyone to maximize their self-interest without intruding on the self-interest of others. Like a good little Enlightenment thinker, Beccaria isn't going to rest until he discovers the **foundational principle** upon which society and its laws can be established. And the principle that he comes up with is simply huge.

The principle that should govern society and its legal code, of course, is **utility**. You are all familiar with it because it is a principle that has had a long and fascinating history in capitalist society. The principle is that the purpose and guiding principle of any society is to **maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number**. And, in order to make utility a foundational principle, you need a corresponding principle for the individual. Again it is huge, although this time Beccaria doesn't invent it. **You have to transform the individual into a citizen**. And being a citizen who decides his or her own happiness within utilitarian limits means that you have **rights**. Beccaria is going to discuss some of those rights at length as he unveils, not so much a legal code, as the principles upon which any legal code for a utilitarian society should be predicated.

Now, I'm not sure that you appreciate the brilliance of Beccaria and the Enlightenment here. In a sense, they are *inventing* modern society. They are also inventing the modern individual. These are concepts. Even if you think that the self-interested individual has always existed, and just been obscured by social convention, isn't it fascinating to see someone explaining the individual so clearly and for the first time. And to watch Beccaria suggest that the patriarchal family has no business controlling the individual and his freedom, and even that daughters are free to make their own decisions in light of their own self-interest – that's modern man! By constructing the principles of society, the Enlightenment opens the door to the individual and nothing will ever be the same again. The *self* has emerged from its cocoon.

### **Embracing Progress**

You probably thought that *On Crimes and Punishments* was just a book about establishing the law in criminal cases, didn't you? Today, we live in a world where law, medicine, education, politics, sociology, anthropology and all of the rest of the subjects that you have to choose your careers from have been divided and compartmentalized. But Beccaria's Enlightenment was just the opposite – *everything was connected and everything was susceptible to analysis from intelligent people*. Enlightened writers wrote about all sorts of things and communicated with and exchanged ideas with one another. You can't call Beccaria simply a legal writer. It would be much more accurate to call him a political scientist or even a sociologist.

But there is something that makes Beccaria quite a bit different from many sociologists or political scientists today. In her search for truth, the modern university professor is supposed to be impartial. Of course, everyone has a point of view and it's difficult to be neutral. But that's today's ideal; scholars are distinct from politicians and professionals. But Beccaria is anything but impartial; he is **engaged**, as were most Enlightened writers. They wanted to make the world a *better* place, and by better they meant modern. In fact, most Enlightened writers (except in Scotland) disliked Universities and university professors almost as much as they did the Catholic Church. They called professors *schoolmen* who were contributing nothing to the society in which they lived. These professors taught the Greek and Latin classics without producing anything useful according to the *philosophes*. They forced people to memorize text and learn obscure rules without teaching them to be citizens. When Enlightened writers talked about the

Greek and Roman works, it wasn't for authority but for *examples* on how society could be improved. But it wasn't just the professors that irritated these reformers, but also the hide-bound professionals. Beccaria had little time for most judges and lawyers. He wrote a passage that I love to quote when I teach law students: "Happy the nation where law is not a science" and where "every man is judged by his peers".

As you went through Beccaria's text, you probably saw many examples of his agenda of modernization. One of his most striking criticisms, of course, is against **cruelty**. Cruelty for Beccaria is not only the absence of humanity but also the sign of a primitive society. The death penalty is a sure sign that a society is tyrannical and that its leaders govern by fear rather than humanity. It transforms those who authorize the punishment into private agents for vendettas rather than true servants of the public. Love it or hate it, the Enlightenment is all about increasing **humanity** in human relations, replacing severity with gentleness, and turning potentially rude and fractious people into polite and civilized citizens. Beccaria and his enlightened contemporaries were hopeful that they could help governments steer a new and better course. But they never underestimated, and always feared, **barbarism**. After all, barbarity and atrocity abounded in history. In Beccaria's words:

If anyone should site against me the example of practically all ages and nations, which have assigned the death penalty to certain crimes, I shall reply that the example is annihilated in the presence of truth, against which there is no prescription, and that human history leaves us with the impression of a vast sea of errors in which a few confused and widely scattered truths are floating. Human sacrifice was common among virtually all nations, yet who will dare to excuse it? That a mere handful of societies have abstained from capital punishment for a short period only is more favourable than contrary to my case, because this is similar to the fate of great truths. They last no longer than a flash in comparison with the long dark night that surrounds humanity. The happy period has not yet arrived in which truth shall be the portion of the majority, just as error has been hitherto.

For many Enlightened writers, the main obstacles to peace and humanity were not only power seeking kings and warrior aristocrats, but also the common people. If you read Beccaria carefully, you will see that he is no democrat. The common people, for him, are rude, illiterate, fanatical, enemies of progress. Moreover, they are essentially cruel because they are easily impressed by power and violence. They are the same people who accused and burned witches at the stake, watching the entrails of the accused crackle, and who frequent public hangings. These are anything but polite.

Some Enlightened thinkers were more hopeful about the common man and woman, and more democratic, than Beccaria. But it must be said that the majority looked for reform from the top, hopefully from an enlightened king who could redirect society along more rational lines. But the major hope for progress needed to come from other forces and the most important of these was **commerce**. The Enlightenment was all about improvement and in the eighteenth-century, and that meant embracing commerce. The Enlightened

author who most identified with, and defined, commerce was the Scotsman Adam Smith and we should not look to find any recognizably capitalist agenda in Beccaria. But what Beccaria does provide is an interesting analysis of *luxury* as a potentially decisive progressive and civilizing force.

The embracing of commerce, self-interest and luxury is one of the defining characteristics of the Enlightenment, and it didn't require an Adam Smith, to construct a bridge between the Enlightenment and modern capitalism. Beccaria defines human happiness or self-interest largely in terms of economic well-being. "The surest way of attaching citizens to their fatherland" he writes:

Is to improve the relative well-being of each of them. Just as every effort ought to be made to turn the balance of trade in our favor, so it is in the greatest interest of the sovereign and of the nation that the sum total of happiness compared with that of neighbouring nations should be greater than elsewhere. The pleasures of luxury are not the chief elements of this happiness, although they are a necessary remedy for inequality, which always grows with the progress of a nation. Without these pleasures, all wealth would be concentrated in one set of hands.

We need to appreciate what Beccaria is getting at here and how modern this kind of thinking is. Luxury was criticized by the ancients as corrupting of the patriotic virtuous personality. The Christian religion also identified greed as a sin. But modern society needed to understand the uses of luxury and to inculcate a different kind of morality. Luxury was good for several reasons according to Beccaria. First, it made those who had money -- i.e. the aristocracy -- more interested in their personal *comfort* than in political power and thus eliminated a major threat to the sovereignty of the nation. Second, commerce or the trade in luxury goods had *spin off* effects through the entire nation. It redistributed wealth by providing the ordinary people with jobs as servants, gardeners and craftspeople to the aristocracy. Third, by encouraging commerce and luxury, the sovereigns of Europe were also nurturing a more polite and civilized society that would favour peace over war. Fourth, the middling or *weaker virtues* of a self-interested society could lead to social stability rather than disintegration.

All of this is very modern thinking for its time, but there is a lot that is missing. Notice the belief of many Enlightened writers that commerce went with peace; they were naïve about the tendency of commercial competition to encourage warfare and to stimulate military invention. Notice also the lack of understanding that dividing citizens into *classes* governed largely by self-interest might lead to conflict. Finally, notice that there is no mention of the class that would soon become the mover and shaker of modernity here -- namely the bourgeoisie, middle class or capitalist class (whatever you want to call them). The two important classes in continental Europe in 1764 are still the aristocrats and the common people. With Beccaria, we are embarking on modernity, but not yet in it. We have a recognizably commercial but not a truly modern capitalist society in our sights.

These various forms of naivety were held in check by the recognition that history was largely a story of cruelty and bloodshed. The 1760s witnessed increased warfare that further checked the optimism of Enlightened writers. But it couldn't check their almost religious faith in the **viability of unlimited progress**. The enlightened liberals of the eighteenth-century like Beccaria, thought that once reason was set free and new and better ideas communicated, the world could change for the better. Economic and social backwardness could be eliminated. These ideas are still very much with us today.

**The essential key to progress was education.** Among the final sections of Beccaria's book are sections on Knowledge (XLII) and Education (XLV). That they come at the end of *On Crimes and Punishments* means that they tend to get overlooked. But if you consider that the entire book is itself an educational text and an argument for the communication of knowledge, you will see that these are anything but afterthoughts. In fact, Beccaria suggests that the way to change the world is to change education. Education should become something "truly useful to mankind" rather than a "sterile mass of subjects". It should be communicated to the "fresh minds of the young". Education should no longer be based on the "uncertain method of command" to achieve "obedience" but should guide "youth to virtue by the easy path of feeling". Just how important this educational psychology was Beccaria makes clear in his fascinating discussion of how the law should teach the masses to behave.

### The 'Nature' of Crime

In the lexicon (vocabulary) of the Enlightenment, **reason** was the instrument of analysis and the weapon of attack on a confused and murky past. The general features and precise analysis of this thing called *reason* were the legacy of the Greeks, but this gift to civilization had been obscured and compromised by feudal (medieval) Christian society. The Enlightenment is often portrayed as the **neo-classical** rediscovery and renewed enthusiasm about the ability of reason, this time not only to **understand** the world but also now to **improve** it. Even the way that Enlightened writers described reason echoed the Greeks because they often described **reason as a goddess** that would aid men in their search for truth. The Greeks, of course, had tons of gods and goddesses that they did not take too seriously but that they could use as metaphors for creativity, fate, chance, etc.

You don't want the focus on Reason (often capitalized because of its importance) in the Enlightenment to obscure an equally important and indispensable concept – **nature**. The Enlightenment *philosophes* piggybacked and extended the Scientific Revolution of the 1600s initiated by English thinkers like Newton and Bacon. What Newton and Bacon had begun was to deploy reason in a revolutionary way -- to investigate the mysteries of nature and the discovery of its laws. The Enlightenment wanted to apply those laws to agriculture and industry in order to control and improve nature. As such, they were huge fans of technology and have been viewed by many as paving the way for the Industrial Revolution that changed Western Society and made it globally hegemonic.

If reason was a Greek goddess for the Enlightenment, its **god was nature**. That didn't mean that everyone who considered himself or herself Enlightened all of a sudden



stopped believing in God. But the concept of God was transformed. The God of the Bible was usurped by a Deity who created nature and its laws, Newton's Divine Clockmaker or the First Cause. Many Enlightened writers called themselves **deists** and they claimed to discover God, not so much in the Bible, which now became a historical story or allegory rather than a literal document for believers, but in **Nature with a capital 'N'**. This marks the beginning of a peculiarly Western fascination with Nature that takes all kinds of interesting twists and turns that need not detain us here. What's *modern* about this redirection of significance and emotion to Nature is that the *intelligenza* completely refocused attention from the world hereafter to the *here and now*. Beccaria begins his little book by informing his readers that he's really not discussing religion issues, while he suggests that revealed Christian truths are incontestable. But you don't have to read between the lines very much to see that Beccaria is really not interested in the Bible and is just covering his ass with the authorities in Catholic Italy. The Italian clergy for sure recognized *On Crimes and Punishments* as a challenge to religious authority.

#### An Aside on Natural Law and Roman Jurisprudence

Beccaria also says at the beginning of the book that he's not interested in *natural law* either. This term – natural law – is confusing and might lead you to believe that he's not interested in nature. Natural law, however, referred to a set of moral principles that were supposed to govern human nature. These principles initially had been suggested by the Greeks, amplified by the Romans, and codified to a certain extent in law or jurisprudence. What they basically defined and systematized was *ethics* or what the eighteenth-century called *virtue*. The problem with this so-called *natural law* for Enlightenment thinkers was that it was completely *unnatural*. It expected flesh and blood human beings to act virtuously, or according to **reason**, rather than taking into account their passions.

The nature that Beccaria and many other Enlightenment thinkers are interested in exploring is **human nature**. All of their arguments begin with and depend upon an assessment of the way that we flesh and blood human beings really operate in real life situations. And, ironically, this means understanding that rationality is not the main spring of human behaviour. The main springs are the **passions** or what eighteenth-century writers typically called the **sentiments**. Probably the closest contemporary term we could use is *human psychology* and the Enlightenment invented it.

Beccaria couldn't have begun his little book with a theory of utility unless he already had a theory of human nature. His theory of human nature begins quite simply. **Human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain. His theory of criminal justice, therefore, is to reinforce the pain that the criminal feels. His most startling discovery is that pain is experienced primarily in the imagination rather than the body.** His self-defined task is to link the imaginary prospect of pain to the intellectual faculty of reason through the association of ideas. His incredibly ambitious project is to construct a rational criminal code that achieves the relatively effortless 'buy in' of all citizens by appealing to their

natures. And he, and by implication the Enlightenment, does all this so smoothly and so elegantly, that it appears simultaneously natural and rational. Everyone in this room is at least partly a product of this brilliant Western propaganda, so you need to pay attention to the way concepts are strung together to form this modern theory of crime and punishment.

Beccaria's operating premise, of course, is that every human being seeks his or her own self-interest that he defines as happiness. In order to seek happiness, he says, you need to be *free* to follow your own inclination. That is why typical forms of social control simply won't work. The more you try to control people, the unhappier they will feel and the more dysfunctional your society will be. So, here is the first principle:

- 1. if you want an orderly society, you absolutely have to minimize the controls that you establish**

Happiness consists of maximizing your pleasure over your pain and requires a certain amount of freedom. But social utility requires that one person's pursuit of pleasure does not negatively impact that of others. Therefore, you need to make a clear connection between anti-social behaviour and pain. Here is the second principle:

- 2. you should not confuse crime which is social with morality which is personal; you only label something criminal which is anti-social**

Crime is a social event that should not be confused with religion or ethics. Pederasty (homosexuality), suicide or even infanticide may disgust you, but labeling them as crimes is problematic. If you are going to label something a crime, your main purpose has always got to be **prevention or control**. Otherwise people will evade or challenge the law. This leads to the third principle:

- 3. limit the number of things you call 'crimes' to as few as possible and to the things that are most pernicious to social utility; not to do this is to 'create' new crimes**

Adding to the list of crimes is always a problem but just as serious an issue is punishing indiscriminately. Your major purpose is always to punish most severely those crimes that are most dangerous to society. If you are going to teach people to avoid indiscriminate crime, you need to be absolutely clear that you are going to punish murder and violence more severely than crimes to property. The fourth principle is:

- 4. punish crimes 'proportionately' in terms of their potential negative impact on society**

That sounds reasonable doesn't it? But in the eighteenth-century a person could hang for stealing a handkerchief as for robbery as for murder. Beccaria, however, warns you not to think of this proportionality too simply because it needs to nicely balance social utility

with personal feeling. Utility always needs to take into account psychology. The fifth principle is:

- 5. when punishing crimes, you always need to marry the ‘public good’ as closely as possible with the ‘individual good’ or as Beccaria puts it, never “separate the public good from the good of all individuals”**

The individual is not only the starting unit of the social contract for Beccaria, but his or her feelings are what you need to target if you want to get acceptance of the law. Because the focus must always be on the feeling and reason of the majority of individuals, the laws must be clear and concise and understood by everyone. The sixth principle is:

- 6. the criminal law needs to be as simple as possible so that everyone can completely understand it**

Just because something is clear and understandable, doesn’t necessarily mean that it gets internalized. The primary way that concepts get taken up in the mind, according to Beccaria, is by associating the feelings of pleasure or pain with cause and effect. If you touch a hot stove, it is painful. If you commit a crime, you are punished. This leads to the seventh and eighth principles:

- 7. society needs to create the impression on the mind that all crimes will be punished, and**
- 8. the interval between the crime and the punishment needs to be as short as possible, especially in the case of the most important crimes**

In order for people to clearly view what is *criminal* as clear, transparent, and leading to punishment, there needs to be as little room for interpretation as possible. In Beccaria’s ideal legal system, there is little place for precedent, technicalities or professional interpreters. Any society, like Canada, where judges have the discretion to interpret and where lawyers can sway judges and juries, is a dangerous society because many people will not respect the law. The ninth principle is:

- 9. not only should everyone be ‘equal’ under the law but the law should operate equally for everyone; those with riches and privileges and any other form of power should never be able to manipulate the law in their own interest**

Beccaria is not arguing for an egalitarian society, far from it, but he does want every citizen to be *equal under the law*. Moreover, he understands very well how those with wealth and power will always attempt to circumvent justice. In fact, he’s incredibly brave, not only in attacking the privileges these people have but also in redefining criminality in ways that nab them. What he suggests in Section XXIV is that there should be a new category for “political idleness”. Those who use their wealth to provide jobs for others or to give charity to the poor or to stimulate economic competition are

exempt. But those who use wealth and power to “wage uncertain and bloody campaigns” need to be banished from the society. The tenth principle, therefore, is:

**10. not only are the rich and powerful not exempt from criminal prosecution, but they should be prosecuted as war criminals if their practices endanger the entire society**

Beccaria wants crimes to be as few as possible and to link them to the sentiments of everyman, but he clearly has made one significant and revealing exception when he attacks those rich and powerful aristocrats and political leaders who threaten public utility with wars. While most individuals look up in awe to these leaders, and even identify with the rich and powerful, Beccaria like many Enlightened writers is annoyed by them and wants to tame them by getting into the administration of the monarch and reforming the society along the lines of utility.

### **The Body (and Nature) of the Criminal**

We now come to the most interesting and much debated aspects of Beccaria’s book – his approach to the *body* of the criminal. Beccaria and the Enlightenment portray themselves as the “Party of Humanity”; they condemn traditional societies as barbaric precisely because of what they do to anyone that they label as an outsider or criminal; the Enlightenment is famous or infamous for its criticisms and condemnations of primitive or uncivilized societies particularly in terms of their *punishments*. In *On Crimes and Punishments*, for example, Beccaria deplores those “dark ages” where judges and jailors played absurd “games” of torture and inflicted “torment on the body of the criminal”. There is a famous passage about witchcraft trials that I’d like to share with you:

The readers of this work will notice that I have omitted a kind of crime which covered Europe with human blood and raised those terrible pyres where living human bodies fed the fire. It was a pleasing entertainments and an agreeable concert of the blind mob to hear the muffled, confused groans of poor wretches issuing out of vortices of black smoke – the smoke of human limbs – amid the crackling of charred bones and the sizzling of still palpitating entrails. But rational men will see that the place where I live, the present age, and the matter at hand do not permit me to examine the nature of such a crime.

What Beccaria constantly objects to, in addition to the *spectacle* of punishment that entrances the barbaric lower orders or *mob*, is the focus on the *body* rather than the mind of the criminal. Leaving aside the fact that Beccaria thinks that many of the people punished in the past were not really criminals but the victims of despotic power, we need to closely interrogate his argument.

There are good contemporary reasons to look closely at what he is saying, since we live in a world where torture is still a fact of life and where it is practiced even by those who claim to be civilized. Guantanamo Bay is a place where people who are labeled as *terrorists* are tortured to give up their secrets. What would Beccaria have to say about

Guantanamo Bay? Well, he'd likely say that some of the people imprisoned certainly aren't terrorists. He'd likely say that their confessions are not trustworthy, since 1.) those who really are terrorists might get released by sticking to their denials; and 2) those who are not might well *confess* to anything in order to get the torturers to stop. But Beccaria might also say that these kinds of activities are counter productive because they label many citizens, especially those of Middle Eastern origin, as potential opponents of the state. Their unnecessary barbarity and unfairness encourages recruits to the opposite cause. And they unsettle everyone of whatever race, colour and creed by rendering civil liberties uncertain.

What's fascinating about Beccaria's argument is not his so much his anti-barbaric rhetoric, but rather that it all boils down to his analysis of human nature and social utility. Inflicting punishment on the body of the criminal is *wrong* because it is ineffective. There are much more effective ways to control criminal behaviour by focusing on the psychology of the criminal. You don't control bodies by inflicting punishment on them like an angry parent, you control bodies by manipulating their minds. Beccaria is a legislator, a parent to society if you like. Long before child psychology, Beccaria suggested that, if you physically hurt someone, you don't get the desired result. And much more effectively than any child psychologist, Beccaria tells you exactly why.

First, while physical punishment is spectacular, it is of too limited a duration to really impress itself upon the mind and act as a prevention to behaviour. Second, physical punishment easily becomes a formalized or symbol ritual that the unruly child can too easily interpret in any variety of ways, even as a personal test of courage or a (perverse) act of love. Third, the more physical punishments multiply, the more unfair they seem and, instead of changing behaviour, they actually consolidate delinquency. Fourth, the other thing that physical punishment teaches a child, is to avoid getting caught at all costs. In other words, it actually encourages lying and sneakiness rather than a parental dialogue that could mould a mature responsible person.

Moving from the family to the larger society, which is what really interests Beccaria, you have to think not only of the effect of punishment on the criminal, who may be past reform, but on the wider community. The spectacle of punishment is a macabre entertainment to most people. Even if it were effective, its power is notoriously short lived. Instead of unambiguously affirming the negativity of the crime, it draws forth people's compassion and can turn the criminal into a hero. Nowhere is the ambiguity of punishment more evident, argues Beccaria than in the death penalty.

Reminding us what the first principle of society is, Beccaria states that society is a contract, a melding of an "aggregate of private wills" into a "general will". No one would enter into such a contract if they knew that it meant other people could legitimately kill them. The death penalty, Beccaria suggests, signifies the *war* of society against the individual and suggests that society has insufficient legitimacy to the extent that it has to annihilate the individual. That impression is dangerous because it puts into other people's minds and makes legitimate the concept of a conflict between the individual and society – i.e., the *war* of the individual against society. It proves that

society has no other alternative and that the rule of law is ineffectively. Thus, the death penalty is a dangerous device when applied to the imagination. For, if society can so cavalierly destroy you, why should you care about its preservation?

Beccaria goes on to argue that the death penalty has no utility because it does not work. In the first place, it is subject to considerable abuse. Those in power in the historical past often used it to destroy potential enemies, many of whom have come down to posterity as heroes rather than traitors. Second, it is an utter waste of a human life, especially in those cases where it is later discovered that the person executed was innocent of the crime. Third, and most important for Beccaria, **it is an utter waste of a criminal example** to others. Let's take the case of Saddam Hussein and apply it in Beccarian terms. Hussein gets executed and there is even a video of his death; he attracts a momentary mixture of "pity and scorn". But the human mind is extremely fickle in its impressions and Saddam is soon forgotten, except of course for those for whom he becomes a martyr.

Sure, potential criminals might "fear" the death penalty and, to a certain extent, that fear is a deterrent suggests Beccaria. But it is not a very effective deterrent for the criminal because it could be easily countered by boldness, bravado and honour, as it is with gang culture in the United States for example. In fact, the death penalty could actually 'harden' criminal behaviour. Wouldn't it be much more effective to let criminals know that the penalty for such extreme crimes would be a very monotonous and slavish condemnation to a life of hard labour, asks Beccaria? But Beccaria is not so much interested in the criminal as in society. He is one of the first to suggest, perhaps not directly, that **the entire raison d'être of punishment is not to seek vengeance on the criminal but to reinforce the norms of society**. If you want to make sure that the majority of people in society line up their private interests with the public interest, you have to constantly remind them what the penalty for opposing their wishes is – imprisonment. The modern deterrent to crime is not the scaffold but the prison. In the prison, the criminal element is separated or banished from normal society and shamed. The prison, as an institution, is a permanent symbol and reminder of what happens to those who break the rules.

When Beccaria was writing, prisons were few in number, primarily places where debtors were confined until they or their families paid up. Life in prison was very much like the outside; visitors were there all the time; the quality of your accommodation very much mirrored your status outside the prison. Beccaria wanted to change all of that. Whereas in the earlier editions of *On Crimes and Punishments* he agreed that bankrupts should be kept in prison "as a pledge of his debts or made to work as a slave for his creditors", in the later editions he fully understood the implications of what he now termed his *science of politics* and his vision of the modern world in which individuals and society could progress harmoniously. Now, the bankrupt would be liberated from the prison and the prison would become the institutional definition of deviance from normality. The normal may have been redefined as humane and civilized, but from the normal there would be no escape. Except, of course, to prison which was no escape at all.

### **The New Order of Things**

Some theorists, namely Michel Foucault, view Beccaria's *Of Crimes and Punishments* as a major intellectual breakthrough, but one with very dark and sinister implications. Instead of the chaotic, rough and traditional world of the Old Regime, writers such as Beccaria were hoping to create a more orderly, effective and bureaucratically managed world. While it might appear at first glance that the Enlightenment allowed considerable freedom for the individual to pursue his or her self-interests within the limits of laws that were clear, concise and in conformity with human nature, Foucault and many postmodernists suggest that the real agenda of the Enlightenment was to manage and order human behaviour in ways that conformed to rational utility. Reason and utility, reinforced by new institutions – such as the Prison, the Asylum and the School – and a new bevy of expert technicians – doctors, therapists, educators – were defining normality in their image. At least in the world of the past, as inhumane and uncivilized as it might appear to us sometimes, there were alternatives.

If Foucault is right, then a major thrust of the Enlightenment was not merely to create a modern and improved *society*, but to ensure that newly liberated *individuals* would conform to what that society and its institutions required. Modern institutions, including the modern capitalistic marketplace, were to be utilitarian, and to be utilitarian meant being rational, and, increasingly, being rational meant conforming to technical efficiency. You can be as individualistic as you want modern people but you can't escape the bureaucratic machine. The major and decisive difference between the Old Regime and modern society, is that the pre-modern world for all its harshness and injustice lacked the institutional apparatus to establish what normal meant and to impose the order of normality upon the masses. It also lacked the psychological understanding about how you manipulate people's passions in scientific way to get them to do what you want.

According to Foucault, most of what he dislikes about modern society can be found in Beccaria. Beccaria shows you how to simultaneously liberate and control people's ideas and get them to act in ways that rationally support the larger society (rationality defined as enlightened self-interest) and allow that society to grow. As an additional gift, Beccaria paves the way for the modern prison, the place where all those who don't conform are separated and confined, and provide an example to others. Now, you may not agree with Foucault on any number of grounds. You may, for example, that Beccaria's commitment to humanity is genuine and his belief that improvement and civilization will benefit everyone has come true. You may think that modern society is vastly superior to the harsh world of the past, where life was nasty, brutish and short. And you may well wonder and fear any *alternatives* to modern society that people like Foucault might imagine. At the same time, you might wonder if modern reason and social utility and the *age of improvement* have gone too far and whether our much-vaunted progress may be making us less happy. And you might wonder if the political and economic science of the Enlightenment has made some contribution to our present unhappiness.

Beccaria has gone through various transformations in western scholarship. He was praised during the most of the nineteenth-century as providing the platform for a more

humane system of laws. During the twentieth-century, he was enlisted as an early champion of bourgeois individualism. During the twenty-first century, when we are more confused and conflicted about the modern world, he has been stereotyped as the pioneer of the bureaucratic and institutional controls that have disconnected us from one another, from our environment and even from the very happiness that he and other Enlightened writers promised us.

The verdict on the Enlightenment, and by implication modernity, is still out and you and future generations are the people who will be doing the voting. But before I leave Beccaria, I would like to highlight one aspect of the Enlightenment that often gets overlooked by its fans and its critics. If you read Beccaria correctly, you will be aware that he doesn't respect many of you or at least where you came from. Beccaria doesn't like the common people very much. He thinks that they share a herd or *mob* mentality and are incapable of thinking for themselves. He thinks that they tend to be superstitious, fanatical, and dogmatic in their stupidity. He scorns them for not being able to read anything other than junk. He thinks that most of them are passive receptacles for spectacle. And he believes, not only that they have virtually no *analytical* or critical abilities whatsoever, but that they are so moronic that they don't even want them.

That's why Beccaria, like many Enlightenment writers, is not a democrat. He may believe in the abstract rights of men and women and their equality before the law, but he also believes that people like himself are entitled to run society. To the extent most Enlightenment could conceive of democracy, it would only be after people like you were educated. This little book, *On Crimes and Punishments* was Beccaria's resume to become an administrator to a powerful prince. Even if you don't agree with his arguments, I think you'll agree that it's a pretty damn good resume.

## Conclusion

The Beccaria quote that I considered giving you to discuss in the second week was "Were it necessary to say everything, I should have said nothing." Maybe I'll end by telling you what Beccaria meant and why I chose this quotation for you to *think* about. Beccaria book is an argument for understanding human beings and society. If you want to understand yourself or the changing world that you live in says Beccaria, you shouldn't get lost in details, first impressions, prejudices or dogma. What is more, if you provide intelligent people with sound concepts and principles, they can draw their own conclusions and fill in the gaps. But no amount of conclusion drawing and gap filling will be very interesting with the concepts and theories that inform them.

Beccaria analyzes not only the legal system but also the entire political system in a typically Enlightenment way by trying to discover first principles and building his theories systematically from those principles. He illuminates what was obscure and he creates a new path through complexities, not by endlessly compiling or commenting what exists, but by looking for the rationale behind them. His ability to do that frees him from the legacy of conventional, black and white, thinking and allows him not only to provide possible but also highly creative solutions to serious social problems. Beccaria's ability



to look for deeper meanings clearly makes him one of the *movers and shakers* of modernity.

The reason why this quote might have particular meaning for many of you is that you live smack dab in the middle of an *information society* where there is a glut of everyone saying everything but also nothing at the same time. There is a lack of analysis, a lack of understanding, a distinct lack of penetration. People have bits of information sticking to them but they don't know how to use it. Some of the information may be useful, but a lot of it is useless. People, and I include students, are inundated with crap, but they are not equipped with crap detectors.

Unless you had a good high school teacher, you were probably forced to *memorize* all sorts of information that you can repeat in terms of definitions but that is not very meaningful to you. Between the Internet and High School, you've probably had so little time to think for yourself, that you can con yourself into thinking that you really know something. You might have gotten an A for regurgitating facts and formulas, and you might be able to repeat the definition of modernity by looking at Wikipedia but you will never really understand what modernity is or how it surrounds you unless you listen, read, engage and explore.

You don't need to agree with Beccaria, to see that this is a guy who really knows how to think and to make a point. You could do much worse than to learn from him!

## THE QUEST FOR HAPPINESS

### **The Valley of Tears**

The Enlightenment embraced a secular and self-interested society. They were more interested in life on earth than the world hereafter. And they believed in the inherent rationality of people. If all people are capable of rationality, you should let them pursue their own self-interest unless it interferes with the self-interest of others. The Enlightenment view of people is that they will make rational choices just as long as stupid institutions do not corrupt them. And, like the Greek philosophers, enlightened *philosophes* thought that the more rational people were, the happier both they and society would be. The key to the optimism of the Enlightenment was a belief that modern society would be *happier* than the world of the past.

Now, this view probably makes sense to you because we are all to some extent products of the Enlightenment. But I want you to think about it for a minute. How many of you think that you are happy? What percentage of the planet do you think is happy? Why should we assume that people who act rationally are happier than people who don't? The Enlightenment was neo-classical – it followed the Greek's – in thinking that knowledge and wisdom could make you happy. Is there any evidence for that? Couldn't you argue that thinking too hard results in unhappiness? Many of my students quite content wallowing in their own ignorance. Most of the people I know don't want to think; it makes them uncomfortable.

And what about happiness itself? Isn't that something of an intangible? Aren't most of us happy one moment and miserable the next? How on earth can you measure this thing called happiness? In the eighteenth-century, aristocrats measured their happiness in two ways, by their social status and by their leisure to pursue culture. In the nineteenth-century, the bourgeoisie or middle class who usurped the aristocracy measured their happiness in the way that most of you do – wealth and comfort. Don't you need to make some very central and serious assumptions about what happiness is before you can start to talk about institutionalizing a happy society?

And what makes you think that you solve the problem by allowing people to pursue their own self-interest? What makes you think that self-interested people are happy or that they even have a true idea of what happiness is? You might try to get around the problem by talking about rational self-interest or the ability to delay short-term gratification for longer-term satisfaction. But what makes you think that people who concentrate on long-term pleasure are happier than people who enjoy the pleasures of the day? Sure, they might end up unhappy because they haven't been careful or provident enough. But to measure their happiness fairly, don't you have to take seriously the *intensity* of the happiness that is felt and the kind of *character* who enjoy happiness? Lots of very rational, careful and provident people have amassed possessions, but are they really happier than those who haven't? And isn't it the case that many people who appear to be comfortably well off and secure, are really very insecure? And isn't it also the case that

many people who have wealth don't know how to enjoy it? Some people save only for their kids to spend. The first may be more rational, but who is happier?

The feudal or medieval world that Enlightened writers like Beccaria condemned had a very different attitude towards happiness, and one that is shared to some extent by most pre-modern cultures. They recognized that life was filled with pain – in Christian biblical terms, life was a *valley of tears*. To expect or hope for happiness in this life was a fool's errand. If you really wanted happiness, you needed to keep your eye on the world to come, the world that had been promised in the bible. Religion made sense of all the pain in this life, because our earthly existence is but a journey towards the world to come. It is precisely this focus on happiness in heaven that the enlightened *philosophes* wanted to attack. Beccaria and other enlightened writers condemned the exclusively religious viewpoint not only because they found it dogmatic and irrational, but also it interfered with making our lives on earth happier. They preferred the Greeks to Christians because the Greeks concentrated on living the good life on earth and didn't take religion too seriously.

You probably noticed Beccaria's irritation with the Christian religion because it regarded man's nature as sinful and incapable of improvement. Because Christianity tried to fit human nature into its heavenly program, it had a way too negative view of human beings and it wanted to make them feel sinful and guilty about pleasure in general. Christian theologians, preachers and the faithful had the audacity to interfere with smart people like the *philosophes* plans to make life better and to see the potential in human beings. They were obstacles to the progress that would make society and individuals happier and the *philosophes* attacked them with a combination of logic and ridicule. If you look closely at Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments*, you will see that it is not simply the representatives of institutional religion that bug him. He also has a problem with the ordinary people who cling so tightly to their traditional religious beliefs that they don't **want** and are in fact **incapable** of the kind of rational happiness that the Enlightenment is projecting. Their false view of happiness is an obstacle to a more rational happiness.

Beccaria has an interesting and highly patronizing assessment of the *function* of religion. Dogmatic religious beliefs, he suggests, are necessary for societies that are poor and barbaric because keep the lower orders fearful and obedient. Fear and obedience are necessary tools of social control in societies where people are ignorant, barbaric, superstitious and fanatical. People in authority and people with property need to be protected from the general savagery, and religion serves that purpose. But, and this is crucial, in a progressive and luxurious society, you expect a different kind of person and a more gentle, optional and less interfering religion and government. Economic and cultural progress in an *improving* society depends on letting people pursue their own happiness.

## Pleasure and Pain

The enlightened *philosophes* tended towards *utopianism*. In other words, they tended to view progress towards not only a *happier* society but towards a society in which

individuals were perfectly happy because society was constructed in such a way as to ensure *the greatest happiness of the greatest number*. You will never appreciate the optimism of the Enlightenment unless you understand that they have inverted heavenly and earthly happiness. They hadn't completely let go of religious idealizations but wanted in the words of one author to construct *a heavenly city on earth*. Some of that enthusiasm is still with us, but for those who realize that bureaucracy, technology and progress are not necessarily all they are cracked up to be, the idea of utopia has become much more suspect today. Among academics and philosophers and literary writers, you are as likely to find *dystopian* as *utopian* conclusions being drawn.

Where the enlightened *philosophes* made a serious point, however, was not in their quasi-religious faith in the perfect society, but in their analysis that the world of the past condoned way too much unnecessary pain. It is one thing to suggest that perfect happiness is impossible, but quite another to inflict as much pain as is possible. The *philosophes* repeatedly and consistently argued that the world of the old regime was cruel and inhumane. It multiplied crimes and punishments unnecessarily; it indulged in cruel executions that were nothing more than institutionalized vengeance; it even punished people savagely for crimes that were understandable given the weaknesses of human nature. Making adultery a crime or brutally punishing a starving man for stealing a loaf of bread were **cruel**. For Beccaria, this cruelty was reason enough for a civilized society to tone down the number and extent of punishments. What made matters much worse was the fact that most of these punishments were ineffective. The enlightened writers were the first to systematically argue that savage or cruel punishments merely produce a cruel and savage response from people. They label people criminal and thus harden them in criminality. The crucial administrative agenda should be to prevent or reduce criminal behaviour and Beccaria thinks that is best achieved by making punishment inevitable and proportionate to the crime.

Happiness may appear somewhat elusive, but let's substitute a different and less abstract word – *pleasure*. Beccaria and other enlightened writers could be very impressive when they started to contrast pleasures and pains. Maybe no one is fully capable of happiness, but everyone is susceptible to pleasure and pain. Logically, the happier person is the one who experiences less pain. There was more than enough pain to go around in the eighteenth-century without adding unnecessary pain to the list. Intermittent starvation and continual warfare were high on the list of pain producing phenomena. The first and foremost agenda of enlightened writers, therefore, was to improve the economy. And their program for doing that was to allow greater freedom to market forces, particularly the free flow of luxury goods, to improve the overall wealth of the nation. Allowing market forces greater freedom meant that traditional subsistence agriculture needed to be reformed along English lines. More efficient agriculture prevented famine and gave rise to a surplus that could increase the general standard of living, and also flow into public institutions and culture.

You can see Beccaria and his fellow *philosophes* attachment to *commerce* in the section on debtors. In order for commerce to flow, he and others deemed it imperative to do what the English had already done, namely to reform the bankruptcy laws so that people

who went into debt due to bad luck and circumstance rather than imprudence were not thrown into prison. Not only was such imprisonment cruel but also it made for a less enterprising society, which should be supported by legal contracts and public banks rather than interfered with by inefficient legislation. In modern capitalist society, we tend to take it for granted that capitalists should be free to invest and that the national maximization of capital is the key to progress. But when Beccaria said it, lots of people did not like capitalists or capital in the form of money. Moreover, Beccaria says something very revealing in this section on *debtors* that many of us today would question. He says, “the natural tendency of men is to love cruel laws, even though moderate ones would better suit their interest”. (65)

How does this relate to the analysis pleasure and pain, if Beccaria is willing to admit that many people get pleasure (i.e. *love* cruelty)? If cruelty gives pleasure, why get rid of it. The Marquis de Sade, for one, takes cruelty seriously and objects to a rational efficient society that deprives men and women of their need for violence and vengeance. And even Adam Smith suggested that punishment was based on vengeance and that the desire to punish those who offended the community was legitimate. What Beccaria is doing is not simply measuring pleasures and pains, or advocating one over the other. He is doing this and *he is doing something else*. He’s attempting to substitute a new and more socially efficient calculus for measuring pleasure and pain. Moreover, he’s using the criminal system as a device for teaching pre-modern individuals how to tot up pleasures and pains more rationally than in the past.

Attacking the medieval and early modern past as a period of unnecessary and barbaric suffering gave would-be administrators like Beccaria a useful target for critique. The *old regime* was a hodge podge of laws, customs and beliefs that no longer made much sense, but the *new regime* was much more than an improvement on the past. It involved a new way of thinking. When Beccaria starts discussing the way that criminals should consider the pros and cons of criminal behaviour, he is treating pleasure and pain in a completely new way. People, and certainly not the average, don’t naturally think of pleasures and pains in a systematic balance. The kind of thinking that we sometimes call *rational self-interest* has its roots in the calculations of *numbers*. When Beccaria talks about the pleasures and pains of crime, his model seems to be the kind of double-entry bookkeeping invented by Venetian merchants and increasingly common in commercial circles. Rational behavior means adding up the plusses and the negatives of *any* behaviour, not excluding the criminal. And a new and rational criminal code not only operates according to this kind of numerical rationality, but it actively *teaches* the lower orders that rationality.

If you think about it seriously, teaching the lower orders to calculate pleasures and pains and, by implication, to measure their happiness in this new way was imperative. The vast majority of people in society had a very different idea of happiness from the enlightened *philosophes*. They *liked* everything that the philosophes objected to. They lived more for the moment than in the future; they enjoyed *spectacles* and cruel spectacles at that. They lived in and with nature than seeking to control it. They stood to gain little from an agenda of progress, at least in the short term, and their lives would be turned upside down

by commercial or capitalist imperatives. Religion was the special thing that made the average person's life meaningful, because it gave them hope for some redress of their suffering in the world to come. Transforming these pre-industrial kinds of people into more modern men and women meant getting them to measure pleasure and pain very differently. And the first and foremost inroad into the pre-industrial consciousness was the creation of a criminal code that conformed to the new mental reality.

From the beginning, therefore, the happiness program of the Enlightenment sought to substitute for older and more traditional ideas of happiness a new calculus of pleasures and pains that conformed to a more commercial and capitalistic society. And this eventually resulted in a real problem for happiness seeking in the Western world. Ideas of happiness in past societies were *described* in terms of idealizations; the modern idea of happiness is something that is measured in terms of realities. Not surprisingly given this limited notion of *happiness*, it came to be equated with economic comfort. And, since even something as seemingly straightforward as *comfort* tends to be ambiguous (one man's comfort is another's chains), happiness came to be defined in terms of wealth. Modern economics makes no fundamental distinction between wealth and happiness, despite the fact that even the most cursory reflection on happiness suggests that it has less to do with wealth than other factors. The nineteenth-century romantics would condemn this kind of numerical thinking.

Eighteenth-century thinkers are not entirely to blame for putting happiness into this *unhappy* calculus. In their time, there was a lot more pain resulting from economic backwardness than today. They could legitimately argue that the maximization of individual and social happiness required a systematic econometric analysis. Today, most of us would not argue with the fact that a certain amount of comfort is imperative for happiness (although any cultural comparison with Third World countries might very well dispute even that seemingly fundamental conclusion). But we have long passed the stage where economic progress and the standard of living equates with happiness, and today we can say that the treadmill of economic growth has probably shifted our happiness calculus into the *red*. We late moderns and postmoderns appear anything but happy. When we read enlightened writers, we typically envy their optimism the most.

### **The Happiness of the Self**

*On Crimes and Punishments* is not only a book that measures happiness rationally or develops institutions that require people to be rational happiness seekers. Like most enlightenment works, it explicitly seeks to *liberate* individuals to freely pursue their own happiness. Of course, the happiness of the individual and the general well being of society need to be dovetailed and, arguably, this fitting together of the citizen and the state generates one form of happiness at the expense of other more traditional forms of happiness. Be that as it may, and we today are naturally more suspicious of attempts on the part of society to make us happy, it remains the case that the modern individual has a high degree of freedom to define and pursue happiness for himself or herself.

Most of us like this freedom, and we only get really angry when bureaucrats and officials and teachers like me, interfere with our self-centered pursuit. Most of us claim that what we want is happiness. Some of us even think we know what really counts for happiness, and we don't get dragged down by the wealth calculating agenda. I'm always touched, for example, by how many students don't want to be rich but to love or be loved by others. And Hollywood ironically makes money by turning out film after film that makes the point that it is love, and not money, that counts.

This freedom to discover and cultivate your own happiness is something that most of us would never wish away. You have the Enlightenment to thank for much of this freedom, because it was people like Beccaria that suggest that minimum and rational laws would encourage people to develop *themselves*. The idea of the independent self and its happiness is an enlightenment concept. In fact, enlightenment thinkers wondered how anyone could possibly be happy unless they had freedom. Freedom to think for yourself and pursue your own happiness was central to the consciousness of guys like Beccaria that they usually detested any unnecessary form of coercion. Enlightened writers, for example, were the first to attack slavery, an institution that had existed since time out of mind.

Guys like Beccaria were not only opposed to all unnecessary forms of political and legal interference with the individual (other, of course, than the duty to answer questions in a criminal trial), but they also opposed the equally powerful forms of cultural or social interference with individual decision making. Thus, they constantly ridiculed and attacked dogmatic religion on the grounds that it prevented individuals from thinking for themselves. They supported religious tolerance as the only rational policy for a free society, and just as they attacked undue interference from the state, they sought to separate religious from political power, so as to make everyone's conscience the supreme judge of their behaviour. Whereas freedom of conscience was formerly an expedient and strategic policy, it became a core liberal belief in enlightened thinking. Many of us take this kind of freedom for granted and some of us even consider morality to be a purely private matter.

We in the West are a product of this kind of enlightened thinking about *self-determination* and we have pushed it to the extreme where we are totally preoccupied with ourselves and our self-improvement. But I want to explore its implications for happiness. When the Enlightenment let the self out of its communal cage, thinkers may have believed that freedom and happiness were conjoined. Freedom *from* interference and control brought with them a *negative* happiness. Freedom is a very fine horse, but you have to know where to ride it, as Edmund Burke suggested. The huge challenge that freedom brings in the form of *thinking for yourself* is discovering a meaning for your life. And it is not just a case of finding a meaning for you life, as many acolytes of the self-discovered, but finding a meaning for your existence. Now, this very temporal life-form that is the self has all the enormous and overwhelming responsibility for discovering some very complex meanings.

Some of you might be inclined to dismiss this problem. You might, for example, suggest that you've personally found or intend to find meanings in love, family or religion. Good for you. But the modern world has transformed the conditions of meaningfulness. Those meanings are no longer *external* to you; you have to choose and continually confirm those meanings for *yourself*. Moreover, you have to do this in an environment that is not necessarily supportive. Let's take the example of religious belief. You now have the freedom to choose your own religion. But the freedom to choose your religion means that you have a related *responsibility* to have reasons for your choice of a particular religion as opposed to another or no religion. Surrounded by people choosing their own religious positions, you cannot simply accept any religious belief uncritically. Even if you choose your religious position for the best conceivable reasons, you no longer inhabit a world where religion is an integral part of life. In the modern world, it is increasingly difficult to make religion the truly meaningful part of your life that it was in pre-industrial times. That's why we have so many people for whom religion is a Sunday habit or a vague hope of life after death.

And, since we are talking about death, *death* has changed dramatically in the present era. In the past and in traditional societies today, death was/is ritualized by the community and the bond between the living and the departed was continuous and unbroken. In the world of the modern self, death has become a highly personal thing. Even when they claim to be religious, modern writers tend to find death to be a very different kind of phenomenon than in the past because it suggests the *end of one's universe*. A society and culture centered on the self gives rise to altogether new kinds of pleasures and pains, but it is difficult on balance to say whether this freedom to choose for ourselves brings us happiness. Indeed, finding happiness, even the limited kinds of happiness that characterize traditional societies is a challenge for modern men and women, once you go beyond associating happiness with a particular standard of living.

The traditional society that the Enlightenment critiqued had all kinds of organic mechanisms for providing meaning to one's life. Arguably, those ready-made meanings provided a degree of happiness that is inconceivable today. Freedom may be a rush, but it comes at a very high cost. That's precisely why one of the most influential of all enlightened thinkers, Immanuel Kant, denied any necessary connection between freedom and happiness. For Kant, the freedom to think for ourselves was a wonderful new development that separated us from the unreflective societies of the past and illuminated the profound importance of the self as its own subject and its own creation. But the freedom that discovered our higher selves and potential did not make us any happier only *more worthy of happiness*. At least on earth, freedom maximized our immense responsibility to think for ourselves and to live the moral life, without the comfort of any dogmatic assurance other than that of fulfilling our inner nature.

Kant could not confirm a god or a heaven, but he thought that there were reasons to *hope* for one. Why else would we have the capacity to reason, and the desire to do good rather than evil, he asked, unless there was a place where morality was rewarded. But he was dead clear about one thing, and that was that reason and goodness were not always rewarded in this earthly existence. Thinking for yourself is glorious, but it is hard work.



Living a good life isn't fun for Kant; it's a duty. If you expect doing the right thing to bring you happiness, you are going to be disappointed. Even more than simply being disappointed, if you pursue happiness, you will be on a different trajectory than the free human being. Happiness or pleasure relates much more to sensation than to pure or practical human intellect. Even without the Kantian critique, the enlightenment equation between freedom and happiness was bound to run into problems.

### The Utility Formula

If individuals are empowered to discover their own happiness, they obviously need to do so within a social framework that guarantees the greatest opportunity for success. You will undoubtedly be familiar with the eighteenth-century utilitarian formula for dovetailing personal and social happiness -- *the greatest happiness of the greatest number*. The formula seems to make sense, but if you look at it closely you discover it is missing something significant. The emphasis on *greatest* and *number* indicates that this formula is highly **quantitative**. But happiness is not simply or even primarily quantitative; surely it is **qualitative**. The formula works only to the extent that you believe it is possible to numerically calculate the primary ingredients that contribute to happiness. It works best when you define happiness as access to resources and the ability to appropriate social goods. But it tells you less about the quality of life.

Let's be clear about something, whether you agree with utilitarianism or not, something like this formula allowed a recognizably modern society to emerge. By modern, I mean not only *individualistic* but a society where modern and systematic modes of rational analysis dominate. The two most important of these *systems of understanding* were political science and economics. Political science and economics treat people as individual units seeking to maximize their own happiness. The role of the political scientist and the economist is to *calculate* the most efficient ways to increase the happiness of everyone. Political scientists and economists generally subscribe to the *greatest happiness of the greatest number* because it allows them to do their jobs effectively by their own standards. What they absolutely require is that individuals become numerically measurable *units* of calculation. The name that the eighteenth-century gave to these units was **citizens**. The concept of the citizen was an old one that could be traced back to the Greeks, but its meaning was significantly altered to recognize the need for the systematic arrangement of modern society. The old ideal of the citizen was that of *serving* your community and it cultivated a definition of *identity* in terms of *belonging* to that community. The new ideal of the citizen in the minds of political scientists and economists was unique in history – you served society best by following your own interests and motivations. The job of the political scientist and economist was to make sure that your self-interest promoted the general good.

In the section entitled “False Ideas of Utility”, Beccaria illustrates two characteristics of the modern outlook wonderfully. First, he indicates that his analysis of crime and punishment isn't just about crime. It is a political analysis of how to get people, in calculating what they want, to simultaneously do what's in the best interest of everyone. Second, he argues that you can't rely on traditional attitudes or even common sense to

create a political strategy. You have to analyze all the complex factors in order to arrive at “a rational calculation of the drawbacks and advantages of a universal decree”. (73) This rational calculation, however, would be meaningless if it failed to understand that the majority of people are not motivated by reason but by their own self-interest. While people can be educated by good laws and the knowledge of what is in their own interest, the politician and economist always has to take into account the real *motivations* of individuals at any given point in time. This means that good laws and economic arrangements must always *manipulate* individual emotions and guide them towards socially useful ends.

Unfortunately, the emotions of the majority of eighteenth-century people were not so easy to manipulate because most of them were anything but the kind of individuals or citizens whose desires could be guided. Aristocrats desired status, honour and leisure. Their loyalty was not to the state but to their family, and their family was not the nuclear unit that we are familiar with, but a dynastic power. They would invariably place their family’s interest first and the nation second. The emotions of the Italian and French peasantry, the groups of working people that Beccaria and most eighteenth-century *philosophes* were most familiar with, were tied to their village communities and local traditions. Turning these pre-industrial groups into individuals was a daunting task because most of them *did not want to be free* in the modern sense. Moreover, they defined happiness in anything but a modern way. If they thought about what made them *happy* it was either their sense of their own superiority or their sense of belonging. Enlightenment writers like Beccaria wanted to turn these people into *citizens* whether they desired it or not. That’s why Beccaria attacks tradition and family loyalties as serious obstacles to progress in the modern age.

After the initial outburst of enthusiasm for reason and liberty, many writers began to comment on, and many people began to experience, the paradox of utilitarian freedom in the modern age. It destroyed many of the organic and traditional forms of **belonging to communities** and replaced them with supposedly free individuals who were responsible for their own happiness. The potential emotional cost of this freedom began to dawn upon thinkers who realized that not everyone is cut out for this kind of freedom. Psychologically, more people want to *belong* than to be free. In the words of Kris Kristofferson: “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”. What’s lost in the supposedly felicitous move to modernity is the idea of an emotional home. Enlightened writers like Beccaria weighted up the pros and cons of modernity and believed on balance that progress was a good thing. In the section entitled “Knowledge”, Beccaria ridiculed those who clung nostalgically to the past because the future was going to be so much better. Obsolete and meaningless symbols would be replaced by rational laws that are genuinely *sacred* because they affirm your freedom and empower you to determine your own future. Traditional emotional ties were so many chains that prevented the individual from realizing his or her own potential. And, in any case, they would be replaced by something truly wonderful and even “lofty”. The enlightened individual was freed from parochial and oppressive family or parochial values to belong to a new *family* – “his own nation becomes a family linked by fraternal bonds, and the distance between the high and mighty and the common people seems all the less to him as the proportion of mankind

before his eyes is larger” (77-8). This, of course, is the enlightened counterpart of liberty, *the brotherhood of man*.

This *best of all possible worlds* that characterized the early enlightenment soon ran into trouble, even among those who championed freedom and progress, not only because it requires (as Beccaria himself admits) a philosophical attitude that most people are incapable of, but also because it is self-contradictory. How can you possibly champion self-interest and embrace the brotherhood of man simultaneously? The focus on self-interest implies a limited sympathy for others and even a competition with others for available resources. Even if one is capable, as most are not, of seeing the bigger picture of mutually beneficial progress overall, this is a highly *abstract* perspective and very different from a *home* for one’s emotions. As modernity develops, many thoughtful commentators agreed with Bob Dylan that progress and individualism means that you are *always searching for home* but will never find it. But that’s not the worst of it. You can always do your rational calculation and decide that the future is *rosier* than the past can’t you? Not so fast says an enlightened critic of the Enlightenment named Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau said lots of cool things, but I just want to focus on a couple here. First, he condemned modern society for not providing anything like genuine happiness. In modern society, people had become highly artificial and established brand new ways to exploit others. Those with property, money or education dominated and deprived those without. The old inequalities were simply replaced with new and more artificial ones. Second, modern society was competitive, so everyone was looking for an advantage. This meant that modern people were no longer *transparent* to one another; everyone wears a mask so that, says Rousseau, *we know longer know with whom we have to deal*. Finally, modern society was an urban society of *strangers* who were rightly afraid to open their hearts towards one another. The ideals of national or universal brotherhood were unrealizable in a modern environment that put money before feeling. Human nature wasn’t freed; more powerful chains than ever before confined it.

The romantics, who we will be looking at in a few weeks, agreed with Rousseau’s assessment of the artificiality of modern society. Living and writing during the industrial revolution, they deplored the mechanical character and mechanical thinking of modern life that turned people into unimaginative cogs in the machine. The romantics thought that societies in the past were *happier* than societies in the present because human relationships were more organic. Rousseau was typical of enlightened writers in so far as he had no such illusions about the past, was much more individualistic, and contrasted modern man with the *noble savage* who was happier than his modern counterpart because he was independent and truer to his own feelings. Rousseau was idiosyncratic in his dislike of progress, but many later enlightenment writers set the stage for romanticism by beginning to stress the importance of warm feelings and mutual sympathy for happiness. The sympathetic authors began to call for the cultivation of feeling to countermand the perceived selfishness and artificiality of modern society. Utilitarian philosophy came under attack precisely because of its uncritical embrace of self-interested rationalism.

Although the utilitarian formula was assailed from within and without the Enlightenment as narrow and shallow in its appreciation of human nature – and certainly no recipe for human happiness – its continuing influence on modernity has been enormous. If you find utility unsatisfactory, what are you going to replace it with? In the increasingly powerful domains of human specialization – political science and economics – utility continues to be the norm that guides the organization of society. Utility has thrived, not because people find it adequate, but because it provides a benchmark and a guideline for decision-making. Utility will likely remain the blueprint for political science and economics, not because anyone seriously thinks it will provide us with anything like *happiness*, but because dismantling it at this stage might result in considerable *unhappiness*. How do you turn back the clock and reassert the values of what the social scientist Jurgen Habermas refers to as the lifeworld? You might, and maybe you should, but it would be very messy and certainly inefficient. Efficiency not happiness guides modern decision-making.

What the criticisms of utility by sentimentalists, romantics, late moderns and postmoderns have not done is to seriously challenge the trajectory of modernity towards greater and greater efficiency. Perhaps our contemporary concern about the destruction of utilitarian thinking to our environment has a better chance of challenging the institutional and bureaucratic consciousness. What all these critiques have underlined, however, is the burden the modern individual has for producing his or her own happiness. That burden suggests that the *dominant mood that characterizes modernity is not happiness but a mixture of sadness and anxiety*. Arguably that mode pervades among all men and women, but ironically it affects those who are highly intelligent and individualistic the most. That's why so many of the modern writers that we will be looking at are more *pessimistic than optimistic*.

### **Suicide and Depression as Modern Phenomena**

What happened to happiness in modernity? A general and widespread unhappiness gets so associated with modernity that you are entitled to view this course as a bit of a *bummer*. While I want you to appreciate this mood, and the many reasons for it, I don't want you to be so much *bummed out* as to appreciate that the more individualistic and thoughtful you are, the more you need to discover what it takes for you to *create your own joy*. We are all too inclined to seek out happiness from the outside, to hope that society or friends or lovers will provide us with it. Even if we were to imagine a perfect utopia, as Dostoyevsky says, we might not find ourselves happy within it. The only truly feasible modern position is that we create our own happiness.

Lots of people try to find their happiness by loving and being loved by others. Those with more experience will tell you that you have to love yourself first. But while it is perfectly alright and entirely positive and a good starting point to say that in the modern age *self matters*, you've got to recognize that the self and its happiness are constant works in progress. You are free to an extent only in as much as you are free to take responsibility for your own *joy* in a world that is far from being utopian. That would be

hard work at any time, but it is much harder in a world that seeks to dumb everyone down to the level of unthinking bovines. Past societies gave individuals pre-constructed ideals, some of which were quite sophisticated. Modern society has taken away much that was valuable, but it gives you a certain amount of freedom to determine your own course.

Independence comes at a price. Affirming happiness, rather than convincing oneself that one is happy, is hard work. Many of the most creative people in modern society are depressed and suicidal, at least at some point. As Beccaria tells you, in past societies suicide was a *crime*. Why was it criminal? It was criminal because the individual was affirming his or her own identity over the values of the community. In punishing the dead body of the criminal, the community was confirming the right to determine values. We should be clear that Beccaria is taking about a certain kind of suicide here, namely *egoistic* suicide rather than *altruistic suicide* when someone lays down his life for the good of the community. By telling us that suicide should not be considered a crime, Beccaria is telling us three things simultaneously. First, he is suggesting that it is silly to punish suicide because one is punishing a corpse. What is interesting about his position is that the laws no longer have any relation to death or the possibility of an afterlife. Happiness and sorrow are confined to earthly existence. Any possible punishment is left to a largely irrelevant God. Second, suicide ought no longer to be punished as an offense against society because it does no harm to social values. In fact, suicide indirectly affirms modern values by underlining the individual's power to choose. Third, however tragic it might appear, suicide is actually a *right* because every individual is entitled to make his or her own estimate of pleasure and pain even unto the choice of death over life. No one is entitled to enchain the will of another with fears of eternal punishment, much less punish the family of the suicide, who has already suffered enough.

From the enlightened political point of view, egoistic suicide is neither good nor bad in itself, it is simply a *fact*. The father of sociology and inheritor of enlightened analysis, Emile Durkheim, went so far as to suggest that suicide could be regarded positively – i.e. as a sign that people had the freedom to think and choose for themselves. From the political point of view, suicide was only bad if and when it is a sign of a more general social dysfunction. The transition to modernity, argued Durkheim, was bound to effect some individuals negatively, at least until they got accustomed to freedom. It should only be deemed a serious problem, however, if the growing urban centers become permanent *suicidocentric zones*. That could suggest a more general unhappiness in society that politicians and lawmakers might need to take into account. Beccaria suggested that the only, and best, remedy for egoistic suicide was to increase the general standard of living and opportunities for mobility. The “luxury of pleasure” or the “luxury of comfort” combined with freedom from oppression, while it would not benefit everyone equally, would at least ensure a gradual increase of pleasure over pain.

Beccaria certainly did not think that the poor and labouring classes were prone to suicide, nor were they his focus, but in the section on “Suicide”, he makes a fascinating comment on their happiness that relates to modern developments. Even in a progressive commercial society:

Trade still begins and ends with a few people, and the majority of the population enjoys only a tiny share. That share is insufficient to check feelings of want, which arise more from comparison than from reality. But the true foundations of the happiness I mentioned are security and freedom limited only by law. Accompanied by these, the pleasures of luxury favor the common people, and, without them, such pleasures become the instruments of tyranny.

What Beccaria admits, and what we will see developed in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* is that progress is not only uneven, but it can actually leave the majority of the people demonstrably unhappier than before. Beccaria hints at the anomie and alienation of the majority of people who may now feel a lot unhappier "from comparison than from reality". (63) He clearly doesn't feel that he needs to confront this problem of the relative unhappiness of ordinary people, and he's obviously much more concerned about the addiction of the aristocracy to the "luxury of ostentation" that is increasingly dysfunctional than he is about the welfare of those without any power. He wriggles out of the analytical noose by arguing, not that the average person *will* actually be happier with the coming of modernity, but that they *should* be happier because they are free and secure under just laws.

What enlightenment writers like Beccaria either can't see, or refuse to see, is that modernity is highly problematic with respect to happiness. Even if you consider the pluses of pleasure greater than the minuses of pain for the upper classes, the overwhelming majority of people had their lives and livelihood turned upside down by modernity without any significant pay off in terms of happiness. Writers like Karl Marx, who we'll look at later, would show how the enlightened definition of *happiness* was ideology or propaganda for a small group of people who were in fact exploiting the majority. This majority was effectively in conflict with the enlightened minority to the extent that they produced the wealth but did not obtain the reward. Indeed, says Marx, modernity made them very unhappy because they were forced into competition with one another and lost all sense of *belonging* to their species. But Marx, unlike many modern writers, did see a silver lining in the cloud of unhappiness. Industrial and technological progress might eventually make life easier for working people and allow people to reconnect with one another in a new era of cooperation. Marx, like Beccaria, was optimistic about future happiness, but unlike Beccaria, he did not shirk from exposing the misery and exploitation that masqueraded for progress during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what can we finally say about the quest for happiness on earth initiated by eighteenth-century *philosophes* like Beccaria? Despite the fact that there are many people who still hold to the equation between freedom and happiness, as well as the utilitarian formula, it turned out that happiness has been much more elusive than many people hoped. We today should be even more aware than critics of utilitarian thinking from the eighteenth-century to the present, that we pay a heavy price for happiness. The very real freedoms that we have obtained must be balanced against the loss of belonging

that we late moderns feel. Happiness is no longer a given or even a hope, it is something that we have to work hard at. Affirming joy in a modern world bereft of meanings except for the ones we ourselves construct is a challenge. Society doesn't really support us, other than presenting us with symbols and images of happiness based primarily on consumption rather than anything substantial. If happiness has proved elusive even for those who benefited most from progress – the middle and upper classes – modernity has rendered the achievement of happiness even more difficult for the majority of people who have little power over their jobs and are often alienated from their labour and each other. One of the most troubling and hypocritical characteristics of eighteenth-century peons to progress and happiness is the palpable lack of concern, or at least patronising attitude, towards the vast majority of people.

That patronising attitude meant that working people had to fight for their own opportunity to create their happiness -- which they have done with relative success until comparatively recently – while the middle class writers who ignored them struggled with their own increasing unhappiness. The most recent signs are that we live in a pervasively unhappy society, distracted from depression by the entertainment industry, but still vaguely conscious of our own melancholia. The general mood of anxiety is not likely to change in the near future, unless we are prepared to reconstruct either our society or ourselves. In either case, perhaps we should take Aristotle's advice, and no longer focus so much on our happiness as on living a good life and contributing to the well being of our communities. The Greek philosopher may have been right in suggesting that those who seek happiness for themselves are unlikely to find it. We moderns have been seeking happiness for an awfully long time, do you really think that, if we go on the way that we have been going, we will eventually find it?

## The Dialectics of Enlightenment

### Introduction

It is very easy to stereotype the Enlightenment as an Age of Reason that mows down all uniqueness and diversity in its unilateral program of progress. It's also easy to see why many of today's thinkers and postcolonial cultures are either dismissive of or angry about this thing called the Enlightenment. As David Suzuki tells us, the western religion of progress has led to consumption on an unprecedented scale and the deterioration of our environment. As Mahatma Gandhi showed us in his embrace of non-violent opposition to British colonialism, European rationality and improvement served as an ideological cover for the domination of the rest of the world. As the Holocaust of six million Jews during World War II taught us, bureaucratic rationality can be twisted into a systematic agenda for the elimination of difference. And, the globalization of the present could be viewed as making the search for universality irrelevant.

In my opinion, such attitudes are not only wrong-headed, but also dangerous. They are wrongheaded because they present a very flat and simplistic version of Enlightenment. They are dangerous because Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume, Adam Smith, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau still have a lot to give to us living in late-modernity if we are willing to listen. What you discover when you read their works carefully is that Hume, Smith, Diderot and Rousseau, although they lived over 200 years ago, warned us in advance about many of the tensions that modernity would experience. Hume argued that reason was a dangerous instrument in the wrong hands and that the agenda of progress should be slow and careful in order to prevent and learn from mistakes. Smith urgently warned that capitalism would only work to the benefit of nations if corporate power were kept in check by the market because capitalists engaged in trade and production were a self-interested class of people who should never be trusted. Rousseau argued that modern specialization and capitalist property would not only destroy communal values but also make the concept of citizenship worthless. Only those with wealth or knowledge would have real power. And as for Diderot, well I'll be talking a lot about Denis Diderot in this lecture.

The primary point that I want to make is that Enlightened thinking was not flat but *dialectical*. Dialectic is a really important term for you to appreciate, not as a definition to be repeated on an exam, but as a way of thinking that you yourselves all engage in precisely because you are modern and have inherited the categories of the Enlightenment. But here is a dictionary definition to get you started: "tension or opposition between two forces". Prior to the modern world created by the ideas of the Enlightenment as well as powerful socio-economic forces, tensions may very well have existed. But the entire power of the tribe, group and community was directed at nullifying and evaporating differences. The emphasis was on tradition, totems and taboos, or sacred injunctions that brought everyone under the same social umbrella. And this was not only true of Europe but the entire world. The Enlightenment *exploded* all of those uniformities. And, however much Enlightenment writers might have liked to construct new universals to



replace the shared values of the past, they couldn't. The Enlightenment movement was born in criticism or *critique* and, once you've let criticism out of the bag, you can't put it back in. One of the most fascinating characteristics of the European Enlightenment, and the thing that makes it still relevant today, is that it was *self-critiquing*. What is more, the Enlightenment emerged from a desire to improve or make progress in the real world, but that meant having to deal with reality and reality is rather messy. The greatest Enlightenment thinkers refused to sweep inconvenient truths under the carpet and believed that it was their responsibility to explore all the *tensions* of modernity. In Goethe's *Faust*, for example, the Enlightened thinker constructs all kinds of utopian visions of a better world, but when he emerges from his ivory tower, he is forced to recognize that many of his efforts could backfire on him and those that he loves. He has to learn to live with *ambiguity*. Finally, Enlightenment writers were much more concerned about the impact of modernity on what we today call *ethics* or shared moral principles or shared feelings of community. Most of them couldn't simply embrace modern inventions like capitalism or politics or sociology without serious ethical reservations. Many of them knew that *modernity is a moral problem*. And you can't solve the moral problem of modernity simply by echoing classical patriotic virtue or Christian charity.

There are numerous examples of dialectical discourse in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the dialectical tensions actually increase as you get closer to the French and the Industrial Revolutions of the late eighteenth-century. In other words, Enlightenment writers became increasingly concerned about the darker side of modernity as some of its features, like the *division of labour*, the development of class society, the emergence of bureaucracy, capitalist competition and the deadly destructiveness of modern warfare become clearer. For today, I want to focus on five of these dialectical tensions as they were exhibited in the Enlightenment: autonomy and reason, specialization and happiness, self and society, money and morality, nature and civilization. I'm going to do this primarily with reference to *Rameau's Nephew* by Denis Diderot.

### **Autonomy and Reason**

Denis Diderot worked on *Rameau's Nephew* through most of his life but it was only published after his death. No one knows for absolute certain why Diderot did not publish the work in his lifetime, but one reason might be that it could be read as an attack on the Enlightenment by one of the chief proponents of Enlightenment. The philosopher in the book is obviously Diderot – the person who stands for progress, education, humanity and civilization. But Rameau's nephew is also Diderot's alter ego, interrogating the entire Enlightenment program and seriously questioning even the motivation of the Enlightened *philosophes*. Diderot showed various versions of *Rameau's Nephew* to his Enlightenment colleagues, so clearly he thought that it was important that those who were responsible for the movement appreciated the dialectical tensions of modernity. Perhaps he didn't make it public because he thought that his arguments might be used by critics of the Enlightenment to impede the reforms that he thought were desperately needed.

Whatever his intention, the important point that I want to make is that Diderot did not promote modernity without understanding its problems.

As we have already seen, the key Enlightenment concept is reason. As Immanuel Kant argued, the Enlightenment is an invitation to everyone to “think for themselves”. Communication in a free marketplace of ideas will allow the best ones to rise to the top; the implementation of the best or most rational ideas will allow us to progress, to move towards a more peaceful, tolerant, and economically developed society. Thus, reason and autonomy go hand in hand; the freedom to think and to communicate those thoughts makes for a better world more in tune with reason over time, which is synonymous with progress. But what if reason is not everything its cracked up to be. What if reason or rationalism could make mistake and threatens historical progress that has been made by trial and error. David Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, suggested that rational utopias were inherently faulty and extremely dangerous because they were based on presumed *cause and effect* relationships. Hume could not discover any absolute *necessary connection* between causes and effects, apart from what the repetition of everyday experience suggested. If you were to advance grand schemes of social reform built on reason, he suggested, you would be extending tenuous links between causes and, in effect, building your utopias on a foundation of sand.

What if a rationally ordered society actually negated autonomy? Autonomy translates into rights and freedoms for everyone, but only if you behave rationally and you conform to the order and controls that a reason-based society demands. Rameau’s nephew makes an incisive criticism of the Age of Reason. The vast majority of people, he suggests, are not interested in behaving rationally or in being part of a rational society. They are interested primarily in food and sex and creature comforts. To the extent that they are committed to society, it is to the people that they are closest to – their friends and family. Rameau’s nephew is not attached to some abstract concept of a rational society; the only person that he is attached to is his son. What is of primary importance to the average person and constitutes happiness is a “full stomach”. What constitutes autonomy for average people is to be left alone to pursue their own happiness in their own way. A rationally ordered society, especially one organized around market economics and a specialized division of labour forces people to conform in all sorts of ways that they might not like. Do you think your Enlightened philosophy is “made for everybody” asks Rameau’s nephew?

Imagine the universe good and philosophical, and admit that it would be devilishly dull. So long live philosophy and long live the wisdom of Solomon – drink good wine, blow yourself out with luscious food, have a tumble with lovely women, lie on soft beds. Apart from that the rest is vanity.

Flesh and blood people don’t live lives of reason, argues Rameau’s nephew, the most important and “final outcome” is “to evacuate the bowels easily, freely, pleasantly and copiously every evening”.

What would a rational utopia look like and why on earth would anyone want to live in it, asks Rameau's nephew? And the point that he makes is a profound one. People, including those who claim to be Enlightened, do not govern themselves by reason but by their feelings. To try to make passionate human beings conform to rational structures, however elegant and logical, is to make a very serious mistake. Most people are "mediocre"; to try to force or educate them into acting rationally is to seriously "mutate" their personalities. And to assume that reason has anything to do with happiness is to make an even bigger mistake. A rational society only replaces sin with guilt and what little happiness we can achieve with "self-contempt".

### **Specialization and Happiness**

Consider closely, says Diderot's nephew, the nature of a modern rationally ordered progressive society. It is characterized by *specialization* an intricate division of labour. Specialization is highly rational because it increases production and advances knowledge. The focal points of modern society are the urban centers where a critical mass of people allows for specialization. In this specialized urban society, you have to discover a particular niche or *role* for yourself; in other words, you have to conform to market rules. This certainly doesn't make me very happy, says Rameau's nephew, and it certainly doesn't give me a sense of belonging. First you offer me "free will" and a sense of dignity, says Rameau's nephew, and then I discover that I have to "crawl". "I am myself, and I remain myself", vents Rameau's nephew, "but I act and speak as occasion requires".

Rameau's nephew informs Diderot that he feels like an alien in modern society. Why is he alienated? Why is achieving a successful personality in modern society so hard for him? In part, it is because discovering who you are and what you are best at is intrinsically difficult (as you all know!). But it is also the case that exploring one's potential is almost impossible for most people, because at the end of the day they have to conform to what the *status quo* expects. Don't let the buffoonery of Rameau's nephew fool you; he has quite a bit of talent, sharp insights, and underneath his selfish exterior a very sentimental personality, as his analysis of music shows. But he's completely frustrated because either he lacks the kind of talent or genius that would allow him to play a role in modern society or he can't make the necessary sacrifices to construct a work of art. He needs to make a living in the real world because he realizes first and foremost that the number one lesson of modern life is that "poverty is a terrible thing".

Diderot's nephew is actually making a profound point. In traditional village society, everyone has a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and a fixed role. But a complex urban society introduces a new and artificial hierarchy where developing a successful identity is highly problematic. To the extent that a specialized, urban and rationally ordered society offers freedom or the potential for happiness, it is to those with unusual talent or genius like the composer Rameau, the nephew's much-maligned uncle. Rameau's nephew, and Diderot himself, is clearly envious of Rameau's success. Competition, envy and self-contempt are novel facts of life in this rational individualistic society. In a society based on genius and talent – or if you like today's celebrity-based

society – many more people are confronted with a second-class status *for which they are themselves entirely responsible* and feelings of inadequacy veering towards despondency because they can't measure up. A mobile society of opportunity takes its toll on sensitive individuals. Rameau's nephew contorts and destroys his fingers to try to be a better musician in order to measure up to his uncle; he'd like to be upwardly mobile; but try as he may, he can't make it. There is room at the top in modern society, but only for a few. For most people, there is only guilt because they can't measure up.

The nephew doesn't feel free, can't find happiness in this recognizably modern society. The only way that he can survive is by being dependent on, and subordinate to, those with power and financial resources. This is a society, remember, that generates considerable wealth; that produces beautiful music (like Rameau's or Pergolisi's); that could conceivably transform the world into a healthier and more peaceful place. But does it offer genuine freedom or happiness? For most people, doesn't it demand greater conformity? What are the options for an intelligent but not brilliant person in this brave new world? Isn't modernity considerably more productive of *anxiety* and *depression* than one might at first glance suspect? Remember that the brave new world that Diderot is talking about predates the high levels of bureaucracy, the proliferation of mindless occupations, and the market dependency that many people experience today. He's already warning us that there is no necessary equation between happiness and modernity.

Individualism is not something that everyone embraces. Did the common person in the eighteenth-century embrace the modern vision of pseudo independence and all the responsibility, anxiety and guilt that goes along with it? No they didn't. They had to be forced out of their village communities and traditional occupations into the urban centers. In England during the Industrial Revolution that begins around 1775, labourers had to be forced into the factories under the threat of starvation. The age of improvement didn't benefit them very much economically, and least not at first, but it was disastrous for them psychologically because they were forced to become mingled cogs in a mechanistic society. Adam Smith points out that the division of labour is mentally destructive for most people and hopes that education can help them to occupy their brains in ways that compensate for the monotony of their jobs.

There certainly were visions of *progress* in the eighteenth-century, as there are today, that suggest that everyone will be freer and happier in some future world. But to their credit, most of the best Enlightenment writers were skeptical of *utopias* and kept their optimism in check. Some, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were downright pessimistic about the modern urban environment and a specialization that had nothing to do with developing a balanced personality and everything to do with new and unjust forms of stratification. In response to the philosopher's claim that people follow their own interests and find their own levels, Rameau's nephew counters:

Nothing lasts in this world. Today the top, tomorrow the bottom of the wheel. Bloody circumstances take us along, and take us very badly...I don't look down from that height where everything looks the same...You can divide men in to cabinet-makers, carpenters, runners, dancers, singers. It's your business and I'm

not interested...What a bloody awful economy: some men bursting with everything, while others, with stomachs just as clamorous and a hunger just as unrelenting, have nothing to get their teeth into. The worst thing is the subservient posture in which you are kept by need. The necessitous man doesn't walk like anybody else, he jumps, crawls, twists himself up, creeps along. He spends his life taking up positions and carrying them out."

Specialization also gives rise to another problem. Traditionally, a happy person was a *good person* according to no less than Aristotle. Flourishing as a good person – being really happy meant developing your character and personality. With specialization, don't people develop one aspect of their personalities at the expense of all others. Consider, for example, university professors...

### Self and Society

The concepts of the liberated individual and modern society go hand in hand. Theoretically, they intersect and support each another, since a complex society characterized by the division of labour encourages the development of the *self*. But what if modern society was in some ways corruptive of aspects that we associate with the *self* namely independence, personality and character? If personality and character are not components of the modern self, what is it that we are really left with? According to Rousseau, we are left with something much more sinister. Instead of a communicating with real people, we are confronted by superficial entities engaged in social *pantomime* and wearing *masks*.

The masked-ball figures prominently as a symbol in *Rameau's Nephew* for a good reason. Modern society is a society of *strangers* who relate to one another tentatively and in disguise. Authenticity is neither required, nor typically is it condoned. Instead, people distance themselves from one another and communicate in conformity with the civilized rules of politeness. Unsolicited displays of genuine personality and character are *faux pas* or even taboo in a complex urban society. Even honesty, being straightforward, can be dangerous in this competitive market environment. Rameau's nephew pays terribly for a momentary lapse, an injudicious comment. He has not only twisted up his fingers but also his personality to fit into modern society; instead of displaying moral character and integrity, *he has become a character*. It is the fate of many with above average intelligence but lacking in social status to become servants, lackeys or panderers to the wishes of others, or like Rameau's nephew, *characters whose primary function is to toady or entertain others*. Many such people might be inherently capable of developing independent selves, but modern society sabotages it.

Early on in the novella, Diderot tells us that his Rameau's nephew is not a real person but rather a unique literary "character". The literary *cum* ethical function of such a "character" is twofold – to break through the artificial conventions of modern society and to restore "a portion of our natural individuality". Both Diderot and Rousseau suggest that the urban world – the city – is not the place to discover one's individuality. The true person, the natural person, the authentic person comes from the non-urban environment.

The urban environment, modernity in other words, corrupts and transforms personality. It's like Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, which talks about a protagonist refusing to be "planted in a penthouse" and returning to the "plough". The problem for Diderot and Rousseau is that there is no clear alternative to modernity, since the manners of the city are rapidly invading rural society. And, in any case, for most Enlightened writers, Rousseau being the chief exception, the rural alternative has already been rejected. The urban environment must be engaged, but that doesn't mean that all of its characteristics should be embraced.

The chief positive characteristic of urban society for Enlightened writers is that it pacifies, civilizes and improves behaviours that are uncouth, abrasive and intolerant of difference. The chief negative characteristic of urban society, for writers like Rousseau and Diderot, is that it privileges superficiality, artificiality and, worst of all, inauthenticity. In a civilized society, where everyone wears a mask, Rousseau suggests, "we no longer know with whom we have to deal". And most of these polite masks do not belong to virtuous and reasonable beings at all, but to extremely self-interested and vicious creatures that prey upon the weak like wolves upon sheep.

An urban *society of strangers* encourages relationships that are artificial, superficial and transitory. The competitiveness and mobility of modern society even makes it difficult to develop lasting *friendships* – the refuge and guarantee of authentic personality in classical discourse. Rameau's nephew can't confide in anyone, even his wife or kid who, for all his faults, he clearly loves. To the extent that he still has an independent self, which he demonstrates in his debate with Diderot and the mistakes that he makes in society, it is the very epitome of the modern self – for it is a very *lonely* self. Along with the new self-hood comes something unanticipated, self-contempt. Rameau's nephew, like many people today, has to work very hard, and not always successfully, to build up his self-esteem. The modern self is a continual work in progress; its construction only ends when we die. And modern death is terrible in a way that death has never been because it means the annihilation of the self. The Enlightenment hoped to chase death away by creating a heaven on earth – a rational utopia – but its greatest thinkers also feared that their efforts could be in vain.

### **Money, Markets and Morality**

Anyone who reads the Enlightenment writers carefully must notice how much they talk about morality. The Enlightened human being is not only rational but also virtuous. Virtue may no longer be defined in the traditional terminology of military valour or religious charity; it is loosened up substantially to allow individuals to seek their own happiness. But the Enlightenment was a unified program. Happiness and virtue were interconnected. Ultimately, the freeing up of human passions was supposed to lead to ethical behaviour because reason demonstrated the essential goodness of human nature. Reason taught us that even the most conflicting or turbulent passions had a role to play in the balanced personality. *Rameau's Nephew* brings the beneficial relationship between the passions into question and it does so by focusing directly on the unpredictable and potentially pernicious nature of self-interest.

The enlightenment made happiness on earth not merely a respectable but *the* legitimate goal. It assumed that individual and social happiness were consistent. But, as Rameau's nephew argues, "happiness is not the same for all". Moreover, he calls the Enlightenment agenda of the "greatest happiness for the greatest number" a "strange illusion". Instead of a general happiness, what an urban commercial society gives rise to is a world where value and personal "worth" is defined by "wealth". What counts in this brave new world is not talent and certainly not morality but money. The modern "code" is a "credit system" that no longer has any "intrinsic value" but "value conferred by public opinion". And the new public opinion that transforms all traditional values is "gold":

It has been said that a good name is worth more than a belt of gold. Now the man with the good name has no belt of gold, but I notice that nowadays the one with the best of gold seldom lacks the good name.

Whereas in traditional aristocratic society, wealth followed status, in a commercial society, status follows wealth. What this translates into is a more fluid and changeable social world in which those with money – not those with virtue -- dictate the terms of the game. Those without money have to conform to their whims. Much of *Rameau's Nephew* revolves around this Enlightenment dilemma. If you allow self-interest freedom to maneuver, what makes you think that you can control the dominance of those whose only qualification is that they have capital? Those like Rameau's nephew that lack money have to cow-tow to those who have it, because in a mobile commercial economy, those with money provide the jobs. The symbolic ruler of this society is the banker or, to use Diderot's language, the *financier* or *farmer general*.

The tendency of uninhibited self-interest to circumvent or corrupt the dictates of reason and virtue is a major and often ignored tension in Enlightenment writings. To be sure, most Enlightenment writers were onside as far as commercial progress was concerned, but that doesn't mean that they weren't concerned about the tendency towards greed and vulgar ostentation in modern society. In *Rameau's Nephew*, a number of interesting arguments are developed about the relationship between wealth and virtue. The first is that wealth gives power to individuals who should not have it, but think that they deserve it because they are rich. The second is that wealth not only corrupts those who possess it but everyone who becomes dependent upon it.

The new "bloody awful economy" means that personal integrity goes out the window. The secret to success for most people, according to Rameau's nephew, is to get as many paying customers for your services as possible. And the best *method* for doing that is to pander to the customer's needs. The slogan "the customer is always right" isn't something that consumer capitalism invented, Diderot uses different words to say the same thing about early commercial society. But instead of calling this an "axiom", he refers to it as an "idiom" and he asks us all to reflect upon what it means. If doing what those with money want you to do, how on earth can you be independent he asks? And, if your livelihood depends on pleasing others, how can you have integrity? Without real

independence and natural integrity, terms like good and evil become problematic. Those with wealth in the past were supposed to use it for good; even if they didn't, the language of good and evil was clear. The language of good and evil doesn't disappear, but now the emphasis is primarily on *looking good* and having a virtuous image. Because dependent people need to pander not only to the rich person's *desire* but also their *image*, the nature of virtuous behaviour is obscured. If the rich are constantly praised by their lackeys as wonderful people, virtue is usurped by wealth.

Does this sound complicated? Well, let's make it a bit more simple. Diderot provides you with some cool eighteenth-century examples that we can easily contemporize. Rameau's nephew, in order to curry favour and continue eat at a Bertin's (sometimes referred to as *Bertinhus*) table, compliments everything that his pretty stupid Mistress says as pure "genius". And, because everyone knows that compliments are cheap in commercial society, he gets very good at deceiving his clients. Because there are lots of suck ups working the room, he has to get his timing just right in order to get noticed and rewarded. Almost everyone in a mobile urban society is so busy playing the angles that finding an authentic human being is virtually impossible. Rameau's nephew sucks up to Bertin, but Bertin sucks up to guys like Bouret; and guess what -- Bouret also sucks up to the political guy with the most power. When this Keeper of the Seals takes a liking to Bouret's dog, Bouret trains his dog to run away from him to the Keeper of the Seals. Of course, he uses masks to train his dog. Everyone in modern society wears a mask; everyone sucks up to the rich and powerful.

The first thing that goes in a commercial society is authenticity because everyone is a potential client or customer. Providing the customer with what they want may be good market philosophy when it comes to goods and services, but what clients want at least as much is to have their egos stroked. Good customer service often means lying and deceiving to make a living. If you have a good or service that is a scarce commodity, it pays to play up the exclusivity aspect and charge top dollar for your services. But if, as is more often the case, there is strong competition, then you have to ingratiate yourself with your client. In either case, you make your living largely by engaging in customer relations, rather than by being truthful. Sounds a bit vague, perhaps. But look at Rameau's nephew; he's a really good musician who, like Mozart and others, makes a living by giving piano lessons. There was a lot of competition between piano teachers in the eighteenth-century, so you build up your customer base by "trickery" with your clients. You flatter them and their parents. You make it appear that they are making good progress when they are tone deaf. You make your living, in other words, by prostituting yourself.

Let's contemporize this situation, something you should be trying to do when you read things that *seem* unfamiliar. Like Rameau's nephew, I am a teacher. When I started teaching university, it was a privilege to go; classes were small; and professors were highly respected. Many teachers looked down on students and were only interested in those who were potential candidates for graduate school. I didn't like that because I was a working class person who thought that elitism was immoral. Today the situation is reversed and universities are forced not only to meet the demand for university education



but also to compete for students. The administration of York University raps professor's knuckles if we don't graduate a certain average percentage, so we let people pass our courses who can't write a grammatical sentence. While to each other, professors complain about the lack of knowledge and ability of today's students, we engage in 'customer service' in the classroom. Instead of telling you that you don't know anything, that you should read or at least listen carefully before opening your mouth, we encourage you to voice whatever opinion comes into your head. What students are demanding more and more from teachers is that we entertain you or at least that we don't upset your self-esteem by telling you the truth about your work. If we mark too hard, or become too demanding, you all have various customer complaint outlets that you can visit, many of them at the University's expense. And if all of the avenues of deferral and petitioning are not enough, then you can go to the *Rate My Teacher* or *Rate My Professor* website and complain about is in ways that we could never complain about you, because it might hurt your sense of worth. But I digress from my real point. University teaching in the Humanities should be about teaching you to read and think critically rather than entertaining you. A lot of teachers today are more interested in being popular, or at least avoiding conflict, than in actually teaching.

Money is capital. Money is what allows development or progress to happen. Money is the engine and measuring stick of the national economy. But the relationship between self-interest and virtue is ambiguous. Today, most of us assume a free market in desire and an economy in which self-interest governs the relationship between supply and demand. For many of use, morality is a private and individual choice, and we don't bother ourselves very much about virtue. But the Enlightenment believed that virtue lived not only in the writings of the philosopher but also in the hearts of men, and they were concerned that a highly artificial urban society could corrupt innate values. The Enlightened writer who made this point most decisively was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *A Discourse on Inequality* and *A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, hugely popular works in the eighteenth-century, he went so far as to argue that an urban commercial society could not possibly nurture virtue and that we had to look for any remaining integrity and authenticity in small scale and basically rural communities. Rousseau was the one Enlightened thinker who rejected modern urban society entirely, but others were forced to live with the ambiguities.

### **Adam Smith on Wealth and Virtue**

I'm sure you all know that we live in a capitalist market society and that this is a clear, if not the exclusive, defining characteristic of *modernity*. Most of you probably know that the Enlightenment writer who really invented modern capitalism was a guy named Adam Smith. In 1776, the same year as the American Revolution, he wrote what many capitalists regard as the most important economic textbook ever written entitled *The Wealth of Nations*. In that book he described the modern division of labour in the urban environment; he defined capital as something much more interesting than just money in both its circulating and fixed forms; and he advocated something like a market society that balanced supply and demand by forcing capitalists to compete with one another. Absolutely brilliant stuff, especially if you consider that, when he wrote it, all of Europe

was primarily a subsistence based agrarian community and most of it was still basically feudal (in other words, aristocratic, hierarchical, and relatively static) in terms of relationships.

You might be less aware that Smith wrote another book in 1759 entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that nobody much reads today but that Smith himself and his contemporaries thought was just as important. In that book, you might be interested in knowing that Smith argued that it was *sympathy* and not *greed* that made the world go around. He argued that everyone in their heart was naturally inclined to feel compassion for each other and that ethics or group moral norms were a reflection of this human capacity to feel. The nation was first and foremost a moral community. And this meant that no economy on earth should be based on greed. Greed was not good. Greed was bad. It was greed that destroyed the Roman Empire. Smith implied that any stable economy needed to be a moral economy.

Some people think that Smith must have changed his mind or at least his agenda 17 years later when he wrote *Wealth of Nations*. That really is implausible because Smith rewrote parts of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790 and, to the extent that he changed his mind, it was certainly not about greed. Here is quite a paradox then, the one person to really invent the market economy thinks of himself as a moralist. But if you read the 1000 pages of *The Wealth of Nations* carefully, you find out that economist was still very much subsumed within the moralist. I've written a couple of books about this, but let me just cut to the chase in order to underline the dialectical nature of Enlightenment thinking. Adam Smith constantly attacks merchants, industrialists, and what we today would call corporations, in *The Wealth of Nations*. He says that most people are not greedy, they are characterized by a rational self-interest that is consistent with prudence and prudence is the foundation of self-control, which is the essence of virtue. But those capitalists who live and die by the accumulation of *profits* are very dangerous. They are the modern people who are making money the value of all things and corrupting the moral sentiments. They don't need to be eliminated, because they do generate wealth for the entire community and allow everyone to improve their lives moderately. But their wealth and power needs to be clipped.

If the government tries to reign in the urban corporations, however, it you will fail. The corporations know more about the economy and the way it works than politicians. They will either deceive governments or what Smith calls the *public* or they will infiltrate the political process. The more power they have, the more they will dominate as a class and spread their values of greed throughout the nation. In other words, they will *corrupt* the moral community. So, how do you control these corporations? What you do says Smith, is you force them to compete, really compete, by opening up or freeing the market. In a true market economy, demand and supply will be in equilibrium and in a pure market situation, profits will approach zero. Businesses will be forced to moderate their profits, growth will be slowed down to a natural pace, and everyone will benefit. But where corporations have too much power, they will destroy nations (today we would want to add the environment) by stimulating a growth and luxurious lifestyles that can't be sustained.

Now, what I'm saying isn't anything what many of the people who have written on Adam Smith's economics or the Enlightenment in general, have said. A common opinion is that the Enlightenment and Adam Smith are simplistic advocates of market capitalism and apologists for the capitalist middle class or bourgeoisie. But most of the people who comment on Adam Smith haven't read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and most of the people who comment on the Enlightenment don't take its moral discourse seriously. Scholars who work on the ethical and literary Enlightenment rarely talk to those who work on its political, legal and economic legacy. As a result, it has been way too easy to stereotype the Enlightenment and to obscure its dialectical tensions. But my argument is that the Enlightenment has a lot to say about modernity and not all of it is positive by any means. What is more, Enlightened writers were very clear about something that too many of today's critics of modernity tend to overlook, the tendency of capitalism to accumulate wealth in the wrong hands and to make people so dependent on markets that they become functional role players rather than real people. Adam Smith was not confused about these issues, even if he thought that they could be resolved and growth could be contained. When it was suggested by capitalists that his market economy would result in the ruin of many corporations, Smith replied – so what? People who live and die on profit are not really citizens of any nation; their personality is capital and capital is inherently mobile; they will bankrupt the country to fill their own pockets; and they will ruthlessly colonize the world without any care for the citizens of other countries. Smith concluded with a comment that would be heresy in modern global economics but that was perfectly consistent with his market analysis. Those countries are flourishing the best, he wrote, where the price of labour is highest and profits are lowest.

### **Nature and Civilization**

The final tension that I want to explore in this lecture is that between nature and culture. As we have seen, by *nature* Enlightened authors meant not only physical nature whose properties and principles could be explored and improved. They also meant human nature, whose laws were more complex because human beings were not born in a *state of nature* but in society. By *civilization* they meant not only the sophisticated application of science and technology to provide sustenance, security and freedom from captivity to nature, but also the refinement of the best qualities in human nature, the one's that separate us most profoundly from our animal natures. The latter is the reason for an obsession with *politeness* or *manners* in the Enlightenment, because polite manners characterize a personality that exhibits self-control and that is more inclined towards elegance and beauty than appetite and aggression.

A moment's reflection suggests that the relationship between nature and civilization is a balancing act on a continuum. Civilizations that fail to take into account the realities of human nature will be less successful and less happy than those that understand it and work with it. Enlightened writers like Beccaria were concerned to distinguish their ideal of civilization from errors of the past and to differentiate a polished, orderly and humane society from a crude, disorganized and harsh one. The civilization that they envisioned, and that was put into practice in some places, was aesthetically pleasing in that it served

to conform not only to reason and utility but also to feeling. And this was not simply rhetoric. If you look at the Edinburgh, Scotland New Town with its orderly Georgian architectures and rectangular shapes, you'll see genuine beauty. The contrast with the old medieval town – *Auld Reekie* – as it was called gives you a better idea of what the Enlightenment was all about than some of its written works.

What is amazing about the Enlightenment is that it is hard to think of a time when theory and practice were in such harmony, when architects built homes, and even Adam fireplaces, that conformed so completely to philosophical values, when composers like Mozart created orderly and elegant little worlds within musical structures, thereby completely transforming them in ways that haven't been matched since. If you were just to focus on the orderliness of Enlightenment architecture and music, on the *harmony* so to speak, you'd be missing out on something equally important. The Greeks had a sense of aesthetics that was elegant and orderly and sophisticated, but the Enlightenment supplemented its neo-classical architecture with feeling.

If you go to Edinburgh's New Town and simply walked down the streets, you wouldn't have the complete experience. You have to go inside and look at the ceilings and fireplace to see the motifs of nature with men and women cavorting happily in nature. The pastoral images still might mislead you into thinking that the Enlightenment was ripping off the Greeks, so I'd advise you to discover the often hidden gardens that are attached to the New Town's squares. You have the Enlightenment to thank for parks and gardens, because the Enlightenment wanted to tame nature and to bring it into the city. The Enlightened garden wasn't like the Gardens at seventeenth-century French aristocratic homes; it wasn't based on showing ones power ostentatiously; it was all about getting back to, and in touch with Nature.

The Enlightenment also wanted people to get in touch with their own nature, or at least the less aggressive aspects of it. Postcolonial theorists are rightly irritated with writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau for inventing something called the *noble savage* and, in effect, labeling and stereotyping behaviours of small scale societies as *primitive*. But, if you are going to be fair to the Enlightenment, this kind of western stereotyping began long before Rousseau arrived on the scene. What is fascinating about Rousseau, and marks the beginning of a new kind of anthropology, is that he genuinely *wants* to understand non-European cultures and that his comparative judgments, however misleading they may be, seek to discover a human nature that is common to all of us. Moreover, this common human nature must be supported by modern civilization. Without such an appreciation for a common human nature, it would be impossible today to talk about human rights in any meaningful way. Enlightenment writers were in the forefront of the opposition to slavery, not all of them to be sure. Some, like Thomas Jefferson justified slavery by combining sentiment and paternalism in a powerful patriarchal package. But without the Enlightenment, colonization would have remained a much cruder and uncontested instrument of religious and economic domination.

Still, it must be said that the recognition of differences among global cultures was neither an Enlightenment *forte* nor an anthropological goal. Enlightened writers were

strategizing around the future direction of European civilization. And one of their obsessions was finding the most judicious balance between natural and civilized behaviour. Rousseau spent his entire life unsuccessfully looking for a place that balanced these elements perfectly. His book *Julie: Or the New Eloise* tries to create an imaginary community in the Swiss Alps where two lovers and their friends refine their feelings without ever losing themselves in artificiality. His *Discourse on the Origin of Languages* presents a description of a pastoral community prior to extensive agriculture with the inequality that comes with private property as the ideal situation. None of these solutions are satisfying *except as imaginative resources* for the exploration of personality. We'll be talking about the cultivation of the modern imagination a great deal in the weeks to come, so Rousseau is a pivotal figure. But the one Rousseau contribution that I do want to discuss today is the concept of *melody*.

You may have gotten bogged down in the debate about music in *Rameau's Nephew*. The protagonist certainly challenges, but never quite achieves the sympathetic ear of, the philosopher except when he comes to discussing music. His argument is that a lot of modern music, and especially that of his uncle Rameau, is based on order and harmony. But this is not music; what is missing is melody. Diderot is repeating Rousseau's argument here and, whether you agree with it or not, it is highly revealing about their acute anxieties concerning modern civilization. It's not simply an argument about harmony and melody. It is an argument about reason and passion. Rameau's nephew's point is that music must be as much about feeling as rational order and harmony or it completely loses its *human significance*. Human social bonds are based on feeling and have their origin in "the physical sounds or accents of passion". Music must be first and foremost "an imitation of human nature" as expressed in communication that is passionate rather than instrumental. We relate to one another by feeling first, and utility second.

What happens when you put undue emphasis on harmony, reason and utility is not only that you lose the human in the social but also the social in the human. What you get is an artificial world that transforms warm and feeling beings into lonely and self-interested role players. All culture, but especially music, reflects the *vigour* and *virtue* of the society in which it is produced. Whereas eighteenth-century Italian music and opera continues to inspire genuine human feeling, French music for Rousseau is focusing on technique and architectonics. When Rousseau and Rameau's nephew criticize this development, and particularly the music of the composer Rameau, you have to appreciate what they want to get at and what the Enlightenment believes.

### **The Gospel of Enlightenment**

No one represents the Enlightenment better than Diderot. In the *Encyclopedia* he preaches the new religion of secular progress and the improvement of the condition of mankind. Knowledge will set everyone free; knowledge will bring happiness. In *Rameau's Nephew* Diderot reveals all the anxieties and insecurities of the Enlightenment – the dialects that might be obscured by focusing only on the utopian aspects of Enlightenment.

Rameau's nephew preaches the Enlightenment gospel in his discussion of what music and legitimate Enlightenment should mean. That Enlightenment set of beliefs is nothing other than a holistic unity, or what Rameau's nephew refers to as the "holy Trinity", a religious reference that all of Diderot's French readers will be familiar with. That trinity depends on being faithful to nature. When melody continues to play its part in music, says Rameau's nephew, you will know that the Enlightenment is on the right track and successfully navigating the rapids of an artificial urban civilization:

The reign of nature is quietly coming in, and that of my trinity, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail" truth, which is the father, begets goodness, which is the son, whence proceeds the beautiful, which is the holy ghost.

The false gods – the idols of the past – will be replaced, not by military or revolutionary force but by the gentle force of truth that stays linked to virtue and communicates beautiful feelings that everyone will embrace. If ever intelligence separates itself from nature and human nature, however, the result will be far from sanguine.

Diderot is very aware that everything depends on who and what is running modern society. He's concerned that getting in touch with one's true self isn't going to be easy. It is especially important for those who preach the new gospel of Enlightenment – who have the power to write, to guide, and to critique – to maintain their independence and integrity. Truth, goodness and beauty have the power to convert an artificial society into one that conforms to the model of nature. But stupidity and self-interest are powerful forces that might require stronger antidotes than the writings of the philosophes. The late Enlightenment will move in a new direction; instead of simply affirming human nature and feeling, it will begin to *cultivate* sentimental feelings. Although sentimentalism as a movement was short-lived and somewhat mawkish, the new gospel of sentiment was set to rock the modern world. Women especially would begin to get noticed and appreciated, but perhaps not for reasons that all of them would have chosen.

## The Strategies of Sympathy

### **An Introduction to Sentimentalism**

In the last lecture, we learned that the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth-Century (1740-1789 if you really need dates) was dialectical in nature. It registered *ambiguity* and, as such it was quintessentially *modern* because modern life exists in the ‘here and now’, and because the here and now is highly ambiguous. Modern human beings are not thrown into a world of meaning; they have to generate their own meanings. This task – the modern task – automatically generates a degree of tension. If you believe that life has no intrinsic meaning and that you are responsible for generating your own meanings, then the tension is very acute. The forms of acute tension have tended to define the *modern* sensibility. But even if you believe that life is meaningful, in a religious or a humanistic way, even if you are an optimist about life, you are going to be confronted by change and your own need to respond to the specifics of *change*. The chief and defining characteristic of modern life is that absolutely nothing stands still. In the words of Karl Marx, “all that is solid melts into air”.

It is because of change that modern life is all about action. The sub title of this course is “Movers and Shapers”. That is what modern human beings have become. It wouldn’t make anywhere near as much sense to talk about ‘movers and shapers’ during the Renaissance or medieval periods. We moderns are constantly on the ‘move’ in order to ‘shape’ our world and ourselves. We may embrace change or we may fight change, but either response involves a choice and to choose is to act. Death, for modern men and women, is feared not so much biological degeneration, but the inability to act. Even in the absence of a decisive goal, the impulse to ‘move’ and to ‘shape’ propels us forever forward. It is relentless.

This spirit of action and movement permeates all the ideas of the modern age. That is the reason we begin to refer to sets of ideas as ‘movements’. The Enlightenment was the first such modern movement and, although the Enlightenment could be contemplative, it was always about acting in order to change our world. It was also a dialectical movement that understood that change involved *risks* that needed to be taken into account. Progress versus morality, reason versus feeling, community versus civilization, nature versus nurture – all of these were topics of acute and not at all disinterested speculation during the Enlightenment. Many of these dialectical tensions were developed and elaborated in a powerful movement within the Enlightenment movement known as *sentimentalism*. The influence of sentimentalism that thrilled and thrived in the 1760s and 1770s has not been fully appreciated for a number of reasons. First, sentimentalism was primarily, but not exclusively, a literary movement. Today, you can really only study sentimentalism in literature departments; it is considered as a literary genre and a footnote to a more piquant and highly charged movement known as *romanticism*. Second, some important modern developments led to *sentiment* being associated with women. The idea that has been pounded into our brains is that gender fixes personality and that women are more *feeling and intuitive* creatures than men. It is interesting that, when I give papers on Adam

Smith around the world, my audience is primarily male. But when I give papers on sentimentalism, it is typically female professors and students who attend. So the study of the Enlightenment has been divided up, with sentimentalism taking a back seat to the philosophy, politics and economics of the Enlightenment. I've actually had male scholars criticize me for wasting my talents on such a trivial subject. They sometimes sound a lot like the Dogmatic Doctor who blasts Werther for wasting his time with children.

But eighteenth-century sentimentalism is far from being a trivial subject or a footnote to romanticism. In my opinion, sentimentalism goes to the heart of the Enlightenment and, much more than Romanticism, remains a pervasive cultural characteristic of modernity. A big claim perhaps, but I'm prepared to back it up. Before I start, however, I want to ask you what it is that *you* want out of life? Now, some of you will say that you want to be *rich*, more of you would say that you want to be *happy*, but most of you will say that you want *love*. What do you mean by love? Isn't that an important question? Do you mean *romance*; but what do you mean by romance? As you know romance is hard to sustain and I presume that you are not so stupid as to believe that you must always be romantically in love, and certainly that you have a modicum of common sense in your relationships. As those paragons of wisdom tell it: "If you want to be my lover, you got to be my friend; friendship lasts forever..." Out of the mouth of babes.

So, let's say you want a love relationship that is also a friendship. What else do you want out of life? Well, you might want friends. But if you want friends, you have to be a good friend yourself. What constitutes a good friend? Isn't it someone you can share your feelings with and sympathize with? What else do you want out of life? Do you want to contribute in some way? Don't you contribute by finding an occupation and doing your job in the economic marketplace? Shouldn't that be enough? Then why do many of you volunteer in hospitals and old people's homes or with children? Ah, children... how do you feel about children? Do you like children? Do you want children? Why would you want children? In the medieval period, poor people wanted children to help out with the family economy and take care of them when they got old; rich people wanted to maintain the wealth and power of their family as a dynasty. But why on earth would 'modern' people want children when they just get in the way? Why do Madonna and Angelina Jolie feel the need to adopt? Why would Britney Spears want a baby when she hasn't even grown up herself?

It's because in the eighteenth-century, brand new ideas about life, love and relationships were generated. These ideas have had enormous influence. You can only learn about Enlightenment philosophy and Romanticism by studying books, but you experience sentimentalism everyday in your life. You judge other people on the basis of whether or not they demonstrate what eighteenth-century writers called the *moral sentiments*, but what you today would call considerate and caring people. We live in a society that economists tell us is characterized by rational self-interest and some of them will tell you that *greed* is a good thing. But I'll bet dollars to donuts that most of you don't like people that are too greedy. Bill Gates and Warren Buffet know this. Once they made their fortune, they feel the urge to prove that they are humane and charitable. That's a trait that eighteenth-century sentimental writers had a special word for and that word was



*benevolence*. One of the gripes that sentimental writers had with capitalism, and one of the reasons they didn't much care for capitalists, was that capitalism and capitalists elevated self-interest at the expense of more fundamental emotional connections between people. As serious to the sentimentalists as the increase in self-interest was the artificiality of modern urban society. Isn't it difficult to develop real relationships with people in the urban setting? Aren't urban values highly artificial? As Rousseau claimed, everyone wears a mask in modern urban society and "no one knows with whom one has to deal". How can you trust relationships so contaminated by style over substance?

Bear with me for a few more moments before I get into the fascinating nuts and bolts of sentimentalism. Before I lay out the *strategies of sympathy* I need to tell you what I mean by strategy. When you read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, you might make the mistake, (as did many in the eighteenth-century, so you wouldn't be alone) of thinking that we should all move away from the city, set up shop in a little village, and spend the rest of our lives communing with nature, fondling children, finding poor or sick people to practice our benevolence on, building good memories to get nostalgic about, and, let's not forget, searching for that ideal partner with whom we will be fulfilled. Then we can set up our little family in the countryside (or the suburbs – a substitute countryside) away from the big bad city. But you would be wrong. The character of Werther was modeled on Goethe for sure, but Goethe wrote another important book called *Faust* in which the hero essentially becomes, guess what, an urban developer! What is more, Goethe himself was an official in the German (then Prussian) government who was as rational, calculating and efficient a bureaucrat as you could ever hope to meet. Goethe certainly didn't ever contemplate suicide, except to the extent that most adolescents flirt dramatically with the idea sometime in their life [daughter story]. Assuming that the Goethe who wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther* remains more or less the same person, you have to look at his agenda or strategies in writing the book. Those strategies flow from the main stream of sentimentalism.

The strategies are all designed to stimulate and reinforce the moral sentiments. The idea is, that by making people more caring about one another, and developing more authentic relationships, you can mitigate against the worst effects of the modern urban world. The sentimentalists want to get you at an impressionable age and to carefully cultivate your feelings towards your fellow man. They are experts at describing pathetic scenes designed to make you cry, because when you cry you are thinking about others rather than yourself. They want to get inside your head and transform you from the inside out. And, in order to do that, they will use all their literary skills to capture you. In fact, they were so good at it that the sentimentalists created a completely new reading public who paid money to cry about Werther. The influence of these writers has been lasting and much more extensive than they could ever have imagined. Writers like Goethe were the pop stars of their time. Every time you weep at a *chick flick*, get nostalgic about the good old days, or fall in love, these guys are still pulling your emotional strings.

Now we're ready to talk about sentimentalism in more boring academic terms.

## What is Sympathy?

Sympathy is the natural operation of sentiment in human relations. It is the process of emotionally connecting with significant others, but is capable of cultivation or extension to wider communities. O.k., so that's pompous; what does it really mean? Sympathy is feeling for others, enjoying their happiness and feeling sorry for their pain. It is feeling happy and sad for the people around you, and wanting to make others happy and to take away their sadness. Sympathy is particularly associated with the sadness of others; you offer *sympathy cards* to people you know who have suffered the loss of a family member. Sympathy also is associated with natural disasters like the Ethiopian famine. But those are only the most dramatic example of the workings of sympathy; sympathy operates on all kinds of levels. When your friend, or your boyfriend is feeling down, you pick them up. And they support you when you are down as well. If they don't do this, it's a good idea to get rid of them.

Sympathy differs from empathy. Empathy is very intense and complete fellow feeling. You see that kind of connection in some communities, where all the women weep as a group at funerals; where an injury to one person is considered to be an injury to all; where there is no separation of self from community. To a certain extent, you see empathy operating in modern societies in one particular place – the military. Soldiers view themselves as a 'band of brothers' and codify that empathetic relationship in emotive rules like "never leaving a fellow soldier behind on the battlefield". But sympathy is not empathy. Empathy has been around forever. Sympathy is much more complex, interesting, and entirely modern in that you never lose yourself in the other person, which allows sympathy to become a strategy of the relationship between the self and the 'other'. Empathy either exists or it doesn't; but sympathy can be deployed much more precisely as one moves from closer to more abstract connections. The practice of sympathy is much more self-conscious than the exercise of empathy and, by implication, lends itself to self-reflection and reflexivity. That also suggests that those who understand how sympathy works can 'stimulate' or, to use the new word that the eighteenth-century began to use to describe sympathy, to *cultivate* it.

The major problem with an urban luxurious society, the perennial dilemma of Western civilization from the Greeks on, is that it disintegrates community. But communal links can be maintained by understanding the way that sympathy works and cultivating it within individuals. Sympathy is the antidote to self-interest. How do you cultivate it? Literature is the perfect tool because it allows you to present the little scenarios of private life in which sympathies form. Eighteenth century writers began to explore sentimentalism in a variety of genres including drama and poetry, but these didn't quite work because drama wasn't intimate enough, and poetry, while intimate, is restricted by form and space. That doesn't mean you can't try, and *The Poems of Ossian* that ends *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is an excellent example of sympathy and sentiment in poetic form. But the modern genre that began to prove its worth for the sentimentalists was the *novel*. The novel can take its time to build sympathetic models, to show what sympathy is, and most important to inculcate it in the relatively defenseless reader. And the sentimental authors knew better than anyone how to trap and compel the reader to

sympathize. Just try not to cry. If you don't cry, it means that you are not reading carefully enough or, even worse, that you are not sensitive. And everyone in the 1760s and 1770s wanted to be sensitive.

The crucial thing is to build sympathy and that means that the chief characters in the novel, like Werther and Lotte, play a complex dual function. On the one hand, Werther and Lotte are role models, in so far as they are both naturally good at sympathizing with others. They reflect what sympathy is not only to the extent that they feel strongly about the suffering of others, but equally important, they are sociable on a day-to-day basis, always concerned about the feelings of others. Thus, their sympathetic natures are built in. They are, if you like *experts* at sympathizing. But this is where the sentimental novel gets very sophisticated. Models or ideal types could conceivably speak to the intellect more than the emotions. You can dissect or mimic a model. The sentimental author tries to *engage* the emotions of the reader with the central character or characters. The most effective way to do that is to put the central character through some suffering, since sympathy identifies much more sharply and poignantly with pain rather than happiness. Hollywood movies have a 'happy ending' formula – a degree of suffering is followed by a pleasant conclusion. But sentimental authors understood the more lasting effect that sad endings had on the psyche. To the extent that sentimental characters were sympathetic devices, they were not simple role models. If they are real enough to identify with, they are real enough to make mistakes and to wander into emotional tragedies.

There are several aspects of eighteenth-century sentimental novels that you might want to consider. The first is that many of them were epistolary; this means that they take the form of letters with perhaps some interesting intrusions by the narrator. Again this is modern, the author wants to take you inside the head of the character and intimate letters between friends, and lovers who are friends, are a way to do this. Later novels will have expressly psychological techniques for exploring consciousness, but the letter serves a remarkably similar purpose and was an ingenious device. The second characteristic is the relative absence of a narrative plot, because the real plot or story is the delineation of the motives and feelings of the characters. It is the feelings of the protagonists and the effect of their situations on the reader that is crucial. The third and quite revolutionary characteristic for its time is the focus on private life and private individuals. Although Werther and Lotte are relatively well off and well educated, there is a sense in which they are ordinary people, albeit with big hearts. We only know them by their first names, which implies intimacy, especially for Germans. Their station in life or place in the social order is only referred to obliquely. This means that anyone who can read can identify with the characters. The extent to which they identified shocked everyone! The three novels that totally dominated (and created a new reading public) the publication market were all sentimental novels, Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Rousseau's *Julie: Or the New Eloise*. Following closely on their heels were James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian*, sections of which are attached to Goethe's novel for a good reason.

I want to move on shortly to discuss major themes and strategies of the sentimental movement and novel, but first I want to teach you something about the importance of cultural history. Some of you may have been put off by Werther. It's not what many of the guys in the class would consider to be manly to shed so many tears. Like so many sentimental heroes, this is a guy who seems paralyzed. He can't hold down a real job because he's too sensitive. In a new world based on action, he can't act. He's happiest talking to children and old people in a place called Wahlheim where he basically sits under two walnut trees and appears to accomplish nothing; at least nothing that the world values. You might be inclined to agree with the Doctor and the PhD who think that he's an immature person who needs to grow up and get a job. But most of all, you'd probably consider him to be a sissy. Even his hoped-for girlfriend Lotte is more put together than him. You'd expect the woman to be more sensitive than the man wouldn't you?

That's because you yourself are a cultural product of the society that created you. In the eighteenth-century, it was clear to sentimental authors that we needed more feeling in society and the people they looked to in the first instance were men. The title of the major work in the genre was *The Man of Feeling*. But something interesting happened to sentimentalism in its short history as a literary genre. It's not so much that men didn't read these works. A rash of male suicides wearing yellow waistcoats in imitation of Werther followed its publication. Men were moved. But the largest readership and the group that made the novel a legitimate form were women. Educated women viewed sentimentalism as a genre to which they were equipped to contribute since it focused on the private life to which so many of them were confined. Also, the female characters described by male writers so clearly played a key but as yet undefined role in keeping the virtuous male personality together that it is not so surprising that, as their characters developed, they rather than men became the resident *experts* of feeling. Finally, sentimentalists may have recognized that the paralysis of their male characters could be sending the wrong message about a modern society in which the first presumption was *action*. Sentimental authors were trying to get men to be a little more like Werther, not to become Werthers.

### The Discovery of Private Life

Slowly but surely, a gendered division of labour developed where men were defined as the rational actors in a market economy and women were the *heart* in the domestic sphere. After all, men could not be at home all day talking to children, but women could. Their appropriate sphere of influence became the home and the family unit became a little world of sentiment unto itself. If you look at literature prior to sentimentalism, you won't find much interest in the *home*. The idea of the home as a place where character development occurred was completely missing. The family itself was regarded less as an emotional unit than as an economic unit. Even Adam Smith, who helped to invent sentimentalism, suggested that children didn't learn how to behave properly with one another until they *went to school*. If it had any special character at all, the self-centering nuclear family was a threat to the community to the extent that it placed a *private* good above the *public* good. Earlier writers like Beccaria may have invented the individual, but their focus was the well-being of the public. Beccaria had little time for the family

that stood in the way of public progress. Sentimentalism changed that emphasis for all of is. For the first time in history, the public good came to depend upon the quality of family life.

The first major and monumental step was to re-evaluate the relation between the public realm of politics and perhaps economics and the private realm. The definition of morality that took precedence before the rule of sentiment was contribution to the community. The more high profile the contribution, the more worthy it was. Therefore, patriotism was defined either by military or political service and virtue or ethics was *civic*. Private life was simply not on the radar screen of social significance. That doesn't mean that private life wasn't rich and satisfying. It simply means that its nature and function was rarely discussed. So we know very little about it. But with modernity, private life and the domestic domain of the *home* is invested with all kinds of importance. The morals and manners of private life are now considered crucial to the maintenance of civilization. First, the home is a refuge from the self-interested and artificial world that proliferates outside of it. The sentimentalists constantly referred to the *sentiment of home* that the Victorians would expand into *home sweet home*. Second, the home becomes the place where moral character is constructed. The family becomes the unit or *little platoon* where the most authentic and satisfying relationships take place. Third, the family becomes the essential key to social solidarity generally. The affections and values developed in the family radiate out to the local community as far as the political center. All depends on the family.

Consider the importance of this shift from the public to the private domain. The family becomes the emotional core and moral foundation of society in the eighteenth-century. Suddenly, the conjugal relationship and its extension to children are firmly on the psychological and sociological map. For the first time, it becomes absolutely crucial that there is authenticity between the founding members of the family. Neither fidelity nor even affection between the husband and the wife is crucial to the family as a political dynasty or economic unit, but fidelity and affection are imperative if the family is the foundation of civilization. Look closely at Goethe's description of Lotte's family and you will have a sense of the importance that the sentimentalists placed on family values. Werther is the right person to cement that family in the second generation because he is devoted to Lotte and their relationship would be much warmer than the marriage to Albert, who may be a good man but isn't the best companion or soul mate. The characteristic of Werther and Lotte that best demonstrates the new importance attached to the family is playing with children, feeding them slices of bread, telling them stories. Most of you will do these things, but would you create works of literature around those kinds of activities? In the eighteenth-century, all of this was completely new. So new in fact that Goethe has to defend the new family sensibility by proxy, with Werther warding off the objections by male peers for doing these kinds of things.

At the beginning of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe wants to win you over to the new and sensitive family man. He's smart – he reads Homer. He's capable – he handles his mother's inheritance expertly. He's a natural leader – able to communicate with and impress the people below him. What makes him the new sensitive male is that he's

“coddled his heart” and developed a special sensibility that makes him an ideal husband and father, that is if he can just keep his more extreme sensitivities under control. There is “nothing dearer to me than children”, he says. Then he tells you exactly what being a good father means and doesn’t. It doesn’t mean strict discipline because each child’s *will* should be free; it means letting them develop as individuals within an atmosphere of love. Don’t forget that a lot of women are reading this and learning exactly what to look for in a sensitive male. Werther’s love of children is reinforced continuously in Book One because it illuminates the modern ideal of a self that is not selfish and that places the appropriate value on family life.

Family life is the safe environment and the ideal laboratory for the development of a self that is recognizably modern in its highly civilized sensibilities but not corrupted by modernity. Children are not only the offspring of an affectionate bond but the metaphor for personal development generally. One of Werther’s most fascinating outbursts is when he tells his friend William “we are children!”. None of us like subordination; all of us thrive through sympathy and approval; all of us have similar feelings that we can cultivate, Werther informs his friend William. In other words, our personality never stops growing. The world around Werther was hierarchical and in many ways oppressive to the cultivation of personality. But the family was a much more democratic environment because it was based on love. One fascinating development is the replacement of the classic ideal of intimacy with the modern ideal. The Greeks and Romans placed enormous emphasis on close male *friendships* (i.e. Cicero and Atticus), and certainly Werther bends William’s ear on more than one occasion. But the friendship that counts for modernity is the one based on love. And love was meant to erase all the outdated male powers over the fair sex in a new bond of friendship.

Or at least that was the sentimental ideal of writers like Goethe and Mackenzie. The reality was much more sinister. It was utopian to believe that the nuclear family could operate outside the radar, the structural inequalities, of the external society. During the nineteenth century, the gospel of the home and the family was preached from every pulpit, but it was a very patriarchal model of the family that assumed cultural dominance. Patriarchy combined with sentiment that gave enormous power to the male head of the family and confined women in highly subservient and restrictive roles as the family’s *heart*. Mary Wollstonecraft was one enlightened author who warned women against succumbing to the *sentimental* strategy. They will call you angels and they will put you on a pedestal, she maintained, but men will really make you their slaves. All the benefits of modern civilization went to men, but all the responsibility for a moral civilization was born by women. Little wonder that, while looking for Mr. Right or Werther, they also demanded equality.

You can’t completely blame patriarchy on the sentimentalists; after all it’s difficult to attribute a patriarchal personality to Werther. Werther is a *man of feeling* after all. It would seem nowadays that Werther is making a comeback. Men are being given permission to be more sensitive. Nurturing males appear to have value in the marriageable sweepstakes. Men are even permitted to “cry”. The family unit, on the

other hand, faces considerable stress in a society where individualism is rampant and relationships impermanent.

### **The Function of Nature**

One of the aspects of *The Sorrows of Werther* that makes the novel a bridge between sentimentalism and romanticism is the worship of nature. There isn't much talk of God in the novel, but God's creation is everywhere. In fact, it's difficult to tell where human nature and the natural world divide because Werther feels nature to his very core. He finds himself in nature and he loses himself in nature. The smallest flower, the dewdrop, the anthill all become sentimental connections. Some of these motifs are *romantic* and the romantic tendencies accelerate in Book Two. But let's stick with Book One for now because it highlights an important difference between sentimentalism and romanticism. The focus of sentimentalism is humanity and nature was interesting to sentimentalists to the extent that it could be *humanized*.

In romanticism, nature tends to be wild, sublime and anti-social. In sentimentalism, nature is tame, pastoral, and intensely social. Sentimentalism's nature is linked to humanity. It is planted. It consists of gardens, agricultural fields, and landscape features like Werther's beloved linden trees. The same goes for any animals in sentimental literature. The birds are lovers; the sheep domesticated; the dog is a member of the family. This is the age of the 'pet'. To the extent that you can lose yourself in this natural world, you are never very far from society. Nature and society are one, and we can speak of a natural society and a humanized nature. The more extreme versions of nature, for instance the lightning display at Werther's first meeting with Lotte, is far too intense and threatening; Lotte, little miss sociability, distracts everyone with a game that reinforces the reign of society back. Werther lets you know that the feelings of his heart, while affirmed by pastoral scenes, are completely undermined by "the eternally regurgitating monster" that is wild nature. Pacified and pretty nature is a typical enlightenment conjunction, the judicious balance of the natural and the improved that the Enlightenment sought. The key word here is *harmony*. The harmonious balance is perfectly mirrored in Beethoven's two pastoral symphonies.

What seems to be missing here, but pervades sentimental literature by contrast and by implication, is the urban world. To the extent that Werther refers to the 'town', it is a nuisance and he just can't wait to get away to one of his "little private kingdoms". The urban world is all business; urban people possess all the "facts" but cannot dream. In order to restore the natural balance of feeling and fancy, you need to get out to the countryside. It is a theme you are all familiar with, but I wonder how many of you realize that *nature* is largely an *invention* of the eighteenth-century and that its sentimental function is to clear the urban head of its factual cobwebs. Nature's "marvelous sunrise", its "wet trees", "fields refreshed", "rolling hills" and "enchanted valleys" are balms for the modern soul. "Picking some sweet peas" in the garden behind the Inn at Wahlheim is a sentimental activity that is only marginally related to the act of eating. Although Werther claims to "surrender all of our Self", don't forget he is in someone's garden and next to the place where everyone drinks together. In the

sentimental lexicon, the term *natural* takes us back, not to a world that is primeval and untouched, but one where the urban influence is loosened and lessened. The peasants in the countryside are “good natured” unlike those “ill humoured” folks in the city.

These are stereotypes, of course, but they consciously developed stereotypes; moreover, they are strategies in a sentimental agenda. Goethe is not a naive painter of sunny pastoral scenes. If you read closely – and he assumes that some of his potential critics could be reading closely -- he lets you know that peasants can be competitive about inheritance, that greedy merchants do operate in the countryside, that urban values have a long reach, and that even the Vicar’s walnut trees are not safe from developers. He knows that nothing stands still, including the countryside. But it is the *idea of rural life*; it is the mental image of a more natural world; it is the ability to appreciate nature; and it is the capacity for emphasizing what is best in human nature that Goethe is interested in cultivating. The image of the happy farmer who gets tremendous pleasure from growing and eating his own cabbages is at one level absolutely absurd. But as a mental picture, it is immensely powerful and used by today’s advertisers very effectively. It provides a therapeutic antithesis to the complexities and artificiality of modern life. It is also a vehicle for pointing to an unspoiled human nature that one can discover in oneself. As Werther declares to Albert, definitions of reason and reality, so-called “facts” cannot “uncover the vital circumstances of an action”; they don’t “get at the heart of the matter”. For the sentimentalists, there was a symbolic truth in their descriptions of people who live more intimately with nature.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the sentimental approach is the link that they made between nature and memory, thus inventing a very modern *nostalgia* for things past. Sentimental nostalgia for the past was a relatively new kind of attitude and a technique for distancing oneself from a self-interested obsession with the present. Nostalgia begins its life as a longing for an imagined countryside, rural scenes, or something like the walnut trees that were planted before one was born, become the stock and trade of sentimental writing ever since. Poems like *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Elegy on a Country Graveyard* capitalize on this connection. What is fascinating is that memories don’t have to be strictly factual. Sentimental authors recognized that memory has several distinctive characteristics that made it very useful to their strategies. First, memory typically idealizes. It lessens the harsh remembrances and amplifies the happy ones, thus taking us out of a more ambivalent present when we remember. Second, memory is moral; we tend to sympathize and care more about the people and events in our past than in the present. Finally, these sentimental memories can have a definitive influence on our sense of identity; who we are is in an important sense where we came from but *only if we cultivate our memory in a sentimental way*. “Memories of things past” bring the tears to Werther’s eyes and fill him with a special understanding that human life is more about the little acts of sympathy than it is about a competitive present. All of this may appear somewhat abstract, but it has become a literary technique of considerable importance. Both sentimentalism and romanticism are strategies for rehabilitating the past and making it work on the present.



Sentimentalism delights in ‘soft’ and ‘social’ images of nature and human nature that can be recalled by memory. More extreme and disturbing images of nature do begin to appear towards the end of Book One; interestingly, this is just when Werther begins to disengage with society because he cannot be with his beloved Lotte. Werther begins to “dread” the “Allness of nature” and to “climb steep mountains” or “hack his way through uncleared forest”. A walk in the moonlight reminds Lotte of her death. The Gothic imagery begins to take over; we are en route to a more romantic world. The romantic vision of nature emerges from the cocoon of the sentimental. For the true sentimentalist, however, images of wild nature and Gothic scenes privilege imagination too much at the expense of reason and common sense. The Scottish sentimentalist and author of *The Man of Feeling* was among the first to praise German romantic writers like Goethe, Lessing and Schiller but suggested that there was a dangerous tendency in these authors to follow feeling wherever it went and to usurp sociable feeling with a self-indulgent *metaphysics of feeling*. Once the feeling self was divorced from society, who knows what the consequences might be. At the end of the day, the romantic view of nature won the literary battle because it 1) conformed to the stronger version of individualism that was emerging, 2) freed up writers from the impossible balancing act of sentimentalism and 3) allowed many more possibilities for the artistic imagination. But arguably it is the sentimental vision of nature that continues to rule our more mundane everyday lives. It’s hard to exhibit romanticism in everyday life, but it is easier to maintain a modicum of sentiment.

### **The Emergence of the Self**

It is a common mistake on the part of students to think that the consciousness of the past must have resembled that of the present. So, you may think that individuals have always existed. People were born free, should have rights, and are the fundamental building blocks of society, even if they have not always been allowed to develop themselves in unfree present or past societies. You have an inflated sense of your personal dignity, knowledge of your rights, and a sense of unfairness when these are trampled on. But I’m here to tell you that the modern *self or individual* had to be invented before it could be internalized. Sentimental literature played a crucial role in the invention of the self because it required human material to cultivate. Ironically, the cultivation of the self was essential if communal sympathies were not to be disintegrated by the artificiality and self-interested characteristics of modernity. The modern self was not simply, as some suppose, an extension of rational self-interest. Self-interest has existed in most societies without ever giving rise to the fascinatingly complex hybrid that is the modern self. Indeed, one could argue that fear of unbridled self-interest was the catalyst that initiated the marvelous journey within.

Because you are young, many of you still adolescents, you should be able to identify with Werther’s desire to explore the *Self* that he occasionally capitalizes. Adolescents are natural philosophers because they don’t like what they see when they look at the world around them and are desperate to find alternatives that make personal sense. You might be interested in knowing that, in addition to being interested in children and childrearing, the sentimentalists were fascinated with adolescence as the stage in which the

relationship between self and society developed. You'll notice too that Werther suggests that Lotte's 15-year-old brother showed signs of emotional development and social connection, echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's linking of sympathy and puberty in his famous work *Emile*. From childhood, through adolescence, and beyond, the modern *self* is a continual work in progress. The "I" of Werther is a new and monumental way of thinking.

The first paragraph of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* contains 14 "I"s and 2 "me"s. What's particularly interesting about all of these first person singulars is that they typically don't refer to actions taken but feelings experienced. The self in question is an accumulation of emotional experiences stored in memory and constantly refined in the light of new experiences. This self is unique and constantly developing. Werther's self is in no way static; it is constantly reflecting on itself and defining itself. This is a sentimental rather than a romantic self, so it is continually measuring its emotional feelings with reference to others. It is not striving for complete uniqueness and freedom but a measured accommodation and sense of belonging with others. What is important about the accommodation that it seeks, with the friend, with those that the self seeks out and signifies as special, with the loved one in particular, is that it looks for sympathetic bridges of varying degrees of intensity based upon emotional closeness.

What this emergent self with the name Werther absolutely refuses to do is compromise when it comes to its identity, an identity based on feeling. This is the dynamic that propels the modern self. Werther has to make a connection between what he feels personally and what he's willing to accept socially, and this makes the construction of his identity truly different from the personalities of earlier ages. In contemporary terms, he's trying to "find himself" and to maintain "himself" in all of his relations. Because he's intelligent as well as sensitive, he's acutely aware of the ways that the external world inhibits his natural development. These obstacles include: considerations of station and status, the need to find an occupation, the preoccupation of most people with material objects, the dogmatic assertions of teachers, the overly rigid obsession of others with 'facts', the lack of social approval for 'dreamers', and the jealousies and moodiness of people. All of these things that go by the term "the world" are intensified by urbanization or the pressures of competition in a complex modern life. Ironically, however, they are also resources for the emergent self because they clearly are for Werther irritants that force him to seek truer and deeper meanings *inside himself*. Some of the meanings, as we have seen, were found in the simpler pastoral world of the countryside, where the simple pleasures of growing your own cabbage put things in perspective. But while Werther may pick and string a few peas, he is not interested in growing a garden anywhere near as much as he is interested in cultivating himself.

In order to do that, he must dig deeper into his own consciousness to discover internal resources that are more meaningful than those offered by a materialistic civilization. The search for the Self is more important than any single discovery, but all of the discoveries that he documents in his letters show the importance of introspection. Werther's biggest discovery is that modern people "torment themselves" and that the first secret to happiness is to be good humoured and easy going. Sociability not selfishness is key. His

second insight is that most of what counts in the world is vanity and the only lasting satisfaction comes from knowing on your deathbed that you have done good to others. But these acts need to be from the *heart* rather than the intellect if they are to leave good memories. You have to *own* your personality. His third insight is that personal identity consists of the remembrance of sympathies past rather than present actions. Perhaps the final conclusion that he draws is that it is the height of foolishness to “wear oneself out for money, honour, what you will” because these are all trivial in comparison with the impressions one stores in one’s heart. All of this still resonates today, of course, as we try to put our busy lives in emotional perspective. All of this is perfectly consistent with sentimentalism.

Notice how easy it is for us today to be to misread the sentimental analysis of the self. We could, for instance, view Werther’s introspection as adolescent self-indulgence without appreciating that the modern self absolutely requires a degree of ‘coddling’ or self-indulgence if the moral personality is to appear. Otherwise, we would simply live a black and white existence where we do what our parents or the authorities prescribe. More problematic, however, is the tendency to view sentimentalism under the rubric of self-interest, as if all kinds of interest in the self can be compressed into one. The kind of self-interest that the sentimentalists wanted to cultivate assumed something about the relationship between the self and its happiness that modernity was obscuring. The fulfilled self, the happy self, and the moral self was *not interested in itself alone but in making satisfying connections with others*. This was anything but the rational self-interest that aligns itself with selfishness. It was definitely not the code of market capitalism. And it has little resemblance to the utilitarian formula of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. It has everything to do with caring and little to do with calculation.

Sentimentalism was a delicate balancing act that sought to tease out the social feelings or passions so that they could affirm community in an artificial urban society. But the emphasis on cultivating feeling always runs the risk of putting passion outside the check of common sense. Something happens towards the end of Book One, doesn’t it? Werther goes a little too deep into the self doesn’t he? His passions take over completely. Because of his inability to consummate his love for Lotte, Werther becomes unhinged. He’s verbally aggressive with Albert, a good Stoic name, because Albert doesn’t appreciate what it means when you embrace your passions. The rules of sense no longer apply, and “when passions rage” in a person “the limitations of human kind” are too oppressive to sustain. The balance is lost. And what is the cause – the cause is *love*.

### **All You Need is Love**

There is a reason why the words “love” and “romance” are conjoined. Romantic love is the exhilarating and passionate melding of two independent personalities who supposedly lose themselves in one another. Romantic love is the ultimate ‘other’ of reason, since it has no rules and no logic but its own. Romantic love is sexually charged, something that makes it enticing and dangerous. Who knows what we are capable of when under the spell of romantic love? The popular songs tell it all; you are no longer sane or

responsible when you are in love. Jealousy, murder, suicide are extreme actions that are associated with romantic love.

Sentimental love is something completely different. While it's relatively easy to define the boundaries sharply, a huge problem for sentimental writers was that they couldn't count on their readers making all the right connections. When impressionable readers identify with the lovers in stories, they tend to lose perspective and the subtleties of sentiment tend to get lost. To make it even worse, some writers blur the distinctions by giving their characters relatively freer reign than is consistent with a social agenda. What makes the classic sentimental writings of Mackenzie, Rousseau and others so tortuous to read today is that the authors are continually walking the tightrope between self and society, and moralizing about the relationship. It's hard to get into the characters' heads when some of their letters amount to sermons. Werther expends so much energy telling his buddy William that his love is "sacred" and that "all lust is stilled" in the presence of his beloved, that you begin to wonder how he could ever have children of his own!

Having said that, sentimentalism absolutely revolutionizes the understanding of what love is. The sentimental writers are the first to clearly define the 'companionable marriage'. In puritan religious writings of the seventeenth-century you have a vague notion of marriage as an earthly partnership on the road to heaven. But it is only in the sentimental writings that we know what marriage is supposed to mean back here on earth. It is a special friendship in which sexuality is a component but transcended by a more permanent and stable emotional connection. If that sounds a bit pale, remember that there can be no doubt of the excitement, restlessness and intensity of the relationship between Lotte and Werther. It's got all the flirtation, anticipation and energy that anyone interested in love could desire. And it's real love – a real connection -- that's operating here. All the artificiality of eighteenth-century language can't hide the fact that Werther goes out of his mind with pleasure when he dances with Lotte. And when she slaps him around in the numbers game, it's a huge tease that you should be able to find a contemporary equivalent for. When they get together, especially when they get together alone, there is *magic*. If that isn't modern love, I don't know what is.

Some of this language draws from an earlier code of lovemaking, especially in French romantic ballads, tales and novels. But the differences are more significant than any similarities. One crucial difference is that modern love is not a romantic escape from reality but a genuine possibility and a desirable outcome for everyone. Werther and Lotte are 'ordinary' people by eighteenth-century standards. Another crucial difference is that love and marriage go hand in hand "like a horse and carriage". In an age where people married people of the same station and according to their parents' wishes, this was a literary bombshell. Every reader knows that Werther and Lotte were *meant* to be together and the suggestion is that parents should never interfere in the course of true love. People had the right to choose their lover in accordance with their own feelings. The fact that Werther couldn't get Lotte according to eighteenth-century rules was, to quote William, a "fact" of life. But it's also a tragedy that needed to be changed. The sentimentalists were trumping parental authority. This is modern – individuals have the right to choose.

With many traditional cultures moving into the Greater Toronto Area, the revolutionary power of this new message about love can perhaps be better understood. The power and stability of love in modern society can only be assured if marriage is freely entered into. Any parental arranging or undue interference is dangerous because it doesn't respect the sympathetic relationships that are to be the new glue of a complex urban world that undermines dynastic, kinship based or even religious considerations. The fact that many of the heroes and heroines of sentimental novels don't get to marry and that most of these die of heartbreak should not obscure the message about marriage and love, and the pushing out of parents. All that unconsummated love does is further engage the readers' identification with the characters and their desire for social change. By the beginning of the nineteenth-century, sentimentalism had effectively made marrying for love the only right choice. You have the sentimentalists, not the romantics, to thank for that. Never underestimate the power of an idea. The companionable marriage with a focus on the nuclear family is already the ideal in the late eighteenth-century even if it does not become the reality for quite some time. It is now so much a part of our consciousness that most of us still believe in love and marriage despite a divorce rate of 50% that probably should be 75% given the unhappiness of many married couples.

I've talked about marriage and friendship, but what about the feelings associated with love. There was a lot that was new in the sentimental message. Earlier explorations of romantic love were highly elitist, escapist and episodic. Now love is meant to last, right through old age and up to death and beyond, not because society or religion demanded it, but because these two people were meant for each other. When Lotte asks Werther on a moonlight walk whether they will recognize one another after death, she is making an obscure afterlife conform to a hope that their affection will last forever. What was the exact nature of the bond between them? Goethe, through Werther, explains it to us through a sentimental metaphor. Love is a shared melody. When Lotte plays a certain melody on the piano, Werther is entranced because Lotte's favourite melody touches his heart. This is probably the first "couple's song" in history; what it implies is that their hearts are beating as one. What is fascinating, however, is that a sentimental love bond does not imply the loss of the individual personality or its capacity for judgment. Werther comments extensively on what a good mother Lotte has become upon the death of her own mother, and how good she is with children. In the words of a recent TV dating service, this relationship is based on true "compatibility".

This most intimate relationship between the self and other is going to bear a very heavy social weight, not only because it is replacing the community and the kinship group as locus of meaning, but also because it underpins national survival. The influence of this idea on history should be evident in the efforts of many Americans, for example the moral majority, to reaffirm those family values that appear to be threatened. By the way, the Americans gobbled up sentimental literature in the 1760s because they thought of themselves as Europeans, and they inhaled it in the 1770s as a vehicle for turning former Europeans into Americans. In any event, sentimental love and the nuclear family have more influence in contemporary America than anywhere I can think of. Ironically, the rationale for sentimental love has much to do with American individualism. For the most

intriguing thing about companionable marriage is that it is the minimum social institution that allows for maximum individual development. The moment that Werther “reads true sympathy in her dark eyes”, he realizes something monumental. He knows that he can trust his “heart”. Because he intuits that Lotte loves him, he becomes *precious to myself*. The individual personality, the “I” is affirmed in the eyes of the other and Werther can say without any conceit “I worship at my own altar since I know that she loves me!” Of course, this burst of happiness sets into motion all the anxieties of modern love. First, do I know for absolute sure that she loves me, and second, even after I we get married, do I know that she still loves me? Love needs to be constantly affirmed, and the pressure to constantly affirm/confirm love *from the heart* is one of the inescapable tensions of modern life.

The individual is not lost, but affirmed in modern love. That is what makes the sentimental treatment of love the ideal platform for close relationships in modern life. Romantic love may be much more thrilling with all its emotional thunder, its shrieking lovers, and its gothic permutations. It’s way more fun to read, which is why we have lots of courses on romanticism and so few on sentimentalism. But sentimentalism won the important battle for both your hearts and minds. To the extent that you link love, companionship, marriage, a family and growing old gracefully, you have bought into the sentimental agenda.

### **The House of Mourning**

It’s hard to follow up the discussion of love isn’t it? Many of you are heavily invested in the sentimental version of love, maybe not now but as soon as you meet the *right* person, trust me, all the sentimental clichés will click in and you will be at the mercy of a discourse invented over two centuries ago for quite specific reasons that may no longer be relevant. To the extent that you embrace urban life, capitalist self-interest, and the risks associated with change, you may not need the sentimental checks and balances. But one of the characteristics of cultural concepts is that they outlive their relevance. Let me suggest that *love* as we understand it could be completely outmoded. But that won’t change my or your need to seek it out now that love has been hard wired into the modern consciousness.

There is another concept, however, that we may not be able to run away so easily from and that is *death*. Death is something that many of us, especially those without religious resources, tend to fear. Today, we avoid dealing up front with death in a number of ways, by taking preventative measures to ensure our health, including the latest cure all Vitamin D, and by funding medical breakthroughs to eradicate disease. The lifespan is increasing, thereby allowing people greater hope of avoiding the grim reaper. The eighteenth-century had a completely different attitude towards death. Rather than seeking to delay or avoid it, they sought out its sentimental potential.

The sentimentalists noticed two things about death. The first was that it put the meanings of modern life into perspective. What did it matter how much one achieved, how successful one way, how much money one made, when life was a short interlude? Death

reinforced what really counted, namely being a good person, defined in terms of having sympathetic relations or memories. The concept of death was at least important as its physical inevitability, however. Thinking about death gave rise to a special kind of feeling that the English labeled *melancholy*. In the seventeenth century, melancholia was considered a sign of depression and treated as a medical disease, but in the eighteenth-century sentimental writer actively encouraged melancholy. Goethe is a perfect example. He thinks about death, about the temporality of life, about all the beautiful living things that will be no more. But he's not exactly depressed about that is he? Does he need Zoloft or Effixer? No way. It puts life in perspective for him. The precise feeling that sentimental authors wanted to achieve was a *gentle melancholy* that puts us in touch with what counts and that connects us to one another because we all share death.

Many contemporary readers are confused or put off by the absolute favourite tactic of sentimental authors – the deathbed scene. What these writers want to do is to make you cry in a very controlled way. They are deconstructing human nature to create a technology of feeling – a technology of tears. Every tear is different, from the inconsolable lover, to the witness of a suffering animal, to the deathbed scene. What makes funeral tears so very valuable to the sentimentalists is that they are gentle enough to stimulate reflection but powerful enough to eclipse selfishness. At a funeral, we connect with one another socially, we commiserate with another's loss, and we wish we could help. Even with condolence cards today, we still write, "if there's anything I can do to help" and we actually mean it. Funerals are powerful social events, but sentimental writers understand that the real power is the power of the imagination, and imaginary deathbed scenes can be perfectly choreographed to elicit just the kind of emotion that the sentimentalists hoped for. There is nothing fearful about these tender deathbed scenes; tenderness is the order of the day. A relatively contemporary poem suggests that "we should not go gently into that dark night" but everyone goes gently in sentimental novels and Lotte's sick friend is no exception.

Goethe builds to the unnamed woman's final hours. He sets an emotional scene by having Werther reflect on old age and ancient walnut trees. The rector and his daughter Friederike provide a prelude and a transition by talking about death and the "death on the pale brow" of a person that you would love to help but cannot. A "tear in Friederike's eye" encourages Werther to elaborate on and contrast the traditional and modern interpretations of death. It is not "dreadful fear" that he succumbs to but the "memory" of past experiences of death; he covers his face and weeps in his handkerchief. Then comes an interlude in which Lotte exhibits in full her love of children, of life and of their "delightful illusions" that should be cherished and Goethe moves us to the deathbed scene proper. Now, it's not the greatest sentimental deathbed scene ever. The English and Scots, especially Henry Mackenzie and Henry Brooke, wrote better ones. Most of the sentimental potential had already been consummated with the rector and Friederike. What's particularly fascinating about this particular deathbed description is the moral.

In her final hour, Frau M. does not think about herself but about the person who will be required to run the household after her. She makes a confession to her husband who is "a miserly, avaricious fellow" who has never been kind to her. Her confession is that she

used some of the receipts of the business to fund a household that her husband's allowance to her would not fund. She wants him to know this before she dies so that he doesn't expect anyone else to manage on the meager allowance. What's the moral here? On her deathbed, Frau M. thinks about others but her husband, clearly a businessman, has spent a life thinking only about making money. "Old M" clearly has his priorities wrong. What's the implication for society? A society that is based on self-interest and greed has the wrong focus and that the most important thing is to care for one another.

### **Conclusion: The Age of the *Philistine***

The dilemma of modern society is that people like 'Old M' rather than *men with sensitivity* are ubiquitous. 'Old M' appears to be some kind of merchant, so it is easy to view sentimentalism as an attack on emerging capitalism. But this is Germany and capitalism doesn't really come to Germany for another 100 years. What is under scrutiny is *modernity* – the urban, artificial and bureaucratic world. When the Germans confront a more recognizably capitalist modernity, the level of tension and the degree of anxiety will increase. For now, it is sufficient to say that people like Goethe are concerned about the rise of *Philistines*.

The person who Goethe calls a *Philistine* is a government official, something that Werther himself will temporarily become, or a bureaucrat. The term *Philistine* derives from the Old Testament and refers to the uncivilized barbarians, whose leader Goliath the Israelite David slew. The term is loaded with heavy negativity. What it suggests is that modern society is being run by number crunchers and factologists rather than people with humanity. The clear implication is that we need more people like Werther, more men of feeling, in important positions.

The insight of the sentimentalists is that, while sensitivity is rooted in nature, it is capable of a high degree of cultivation. They seized on literature and helped to create a new literary genre in the novel in order to influence the direction of modernity. But sentimental literature was only one tool in their arsenal and few of the sentimental authors defined themselves as *novelists*. Most of them also engaged in philosophy, history and what we today would call political science. Almost all of them were engaged in the political movements of their day. In other words, they were not themselves *men of feeling*. Sentiment was a strategy they used to confront what they viewed as *Philistine* elements in modernity. Sentimentalism itself was a movement within the larger movement that was the Enlightenment and a literary expression of its dialectical approach to modernity. It was, as I have argued, enormously influential and helped to create a recognizably complex modern self.

Sentimentalism was succeeded by Romanticism, a movement that we'll discuss next week. Romanticism clearly evolved out of sentimentalism, but it sought to divorce itself from the Enlightenment by attacking reason and elevating imagination. Book Two of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* shows us how that evolution took place and suggests why the passions could no longer be contained within the dialectic of Enlightenment. Modernity was about to bifurcate into those who worshiped progress and



those who critiqued it. A new definition of culture developed that was no longer imbedded in everyday or modern society but that wanted nothing to do with it. From here on in art and literature sought a distinct and elevated status. To the extent that art wanted to communicate with living and breathing human beings, it was to their more abstract and distilled *spirit* that it spoke. It was more interested in geniuses and heroes and eccentrics than in the supposedly impoverished and mundane domain of private life. To the extent that it had a historical perspective, it typically looked more to an idealized past and future than an ambiguous present. Most of all it hated the machine with a hatred that has not dissipated all that much in two hundred years.

## The Romantic Reaction

### Introduction

The title of this lecture is not Romanticism but the *Romantic Reaction* because it is less a coherent movement than it is a reaction to *modernity*. Sometimes its adherents like to refer to the romantic *revolution*, but such an interpretation obscures the overwhelmingly defensive character of the Romantic Movement. It is a highly *emotional* reaction to the competitive, mechanical, bureaucratic and, above all, *mediocre, boring and dumbed down* character of emerging mass society. It cannot easily be contained within a specific timeframe and emerges at different times in different countries. But the decades and countries that have come to define the romantic movement were Britain and Germany between 1760 and 1830, precisely at the time that England was experiencing something called the Industrial Revolution and the Germans were wrestling with what it means to become a modern and hopefully united country. The important thing you have to remember about Germany in 1774 when Goethe wrote the literary bombshell that was *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was that Germany was not a nation but a collection of feudal rural states just beginning to experience urbanization. The contrast between the countryside and its values and the basically administrative towns that were springing up and espousing modern values could not have been more pronounced. In England, the situation was very different, since urbanization, especially in terms of the capital London was much more advanced. But the 1770s saw the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the spread of factories in both the cities and the countryside. The contrast between traditional society and these new *satanic textile mills* was unprecedented and became the very symbol of a new perspective on the difference between a realistic *mechanical society* and an idealized *organic community*.

As you might expect, the romantic critique of modern society occurred wherever and whenever this opposition between mechanism and organism was perceived. It took place later in France than in Germany or England, and even later in Russia, and it took many different forms including the novel, short story, poetry, architecture and art. It has even played a role in continental philosophy in the form of idealism, but it is perhaps most recognizable in music. This because the romantics were concerned to do battle with the Enlightenment and its focus on reason. They wanted to dethrone rationalism by elevating emotion, not just any emotion but a particularly a vibrant and supercharged emotion that sensitive geniuses intuited directly, but whose artistic productions could awaken and cultivate feeling in others. Music does this very effectively. Let's stick with those masters of romance – the Germans. The music of Mozart begins the job of breaking with traditional forms to speak to the individual's emotions; Beethoven transforms the classical canon in works like the fifth and the ninth symphony, and Richard Wagner breaks loose in works like *The Ride of the Walkure*. The Walkure piece was performed in the 1870s as part of the *Ring of the Nebelungen* opera cycle, which tells you that romanticism can't easily be confined within a specific period.

But the decades between 1770 and 1830 are critical to the success of a romantic ethos because they mark the critical break with the Enlightenment. Romanticism owes a lot to

sentimentalism as you can see from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Most of Book One of Goethe's novel was sentimental. But sentimentalism couldn't easily continue to glue a naturally propelled self and an artificial society together or to prevent the tension between reason and passion from rupturing. The romantic tendency is to more completely reject reason and the modern society that reason is creating, not so much as individual writers who could like Goethe be involved in society and social reform, but as a *perspective* that overwhelmingly defined itself in terms of strong emotions whose foundation had nothing to do with reason and absolutely everything to do with passion. The term *passion* begins to replace *sentiment* and feeling means strong not soft emotion. Sentimentalism was also concerned with the passions, but privileged the softer and social passions, and was careful to balance sociability with self-control. In the words of the sentimental author Henry Mackenzie, it was a delicate mix of "something of the stranger with the acknowledgement of our dearest friend". And its consistent goal according to another sentimental author Laurence Sterne was "to teach us to love the world and our fellow-creatures better than we do". A major difference is that romantic feeling shook off the limitations on passion and was not confined by anything but *imagination*. And its major discovery was that imagination could be *cultivated* by pleasure.

*The Sorrows of Young Werther* is not a romantic novel and its author certainly was no romantic, but it introduced a completely new figure in the history of literature. The term *romance* is borrowed by the romance literature originating in the late medieval period when heroes were knights who performed great deeds that they dedicated to fair maidens. The *new romantic hero* is heroic, not by the traditional criteria of courage or manliness, but by his *capacity to feel passionately*. The romantic author is no longer celebrated for any particular literary skill or technique, as much as the ability to connect with the emotions and expand the imagination of the reader. The new romantic *aesthetic* is defined by strong emotions that do not merely modify or supplement reason but that displaces it as the locus of meaningfulness. In romantic literature, strong emotions are what count and the *heart* has reasons of its own. It is not so surprising, therefore, that Goethe had serious reservations about having created the world's first modern romantic hero and contributing to a romantic movement that he considered adolescent. His character Werther was based in part on his own youthful flirtation with love and suicide that he completely got over by writing the novel. If you read the novel carefully, you can see that Goethe constantly warns his readers that Werther is a case of disappointed love gone to an extreme. Moreover, Werther is immature and inconsistent, gravitating from Lotte to Fraulein von B. Goethe was horrified that his *Sorrows of Young Werther* led to the first recorded case of imitation suicide in modern history, with dozens of young men (and women!) dressing in blue jacket and yellow waistcoats and offing themselves with revolvers. He also claimed in later life that Werther's mistake was in shifting his literary allegiance from Homer to Ossian. But, if the romantics learned anything from the sentimentalists, it was that readers, especially adolescent readers, don't give a damn about what the author *means* or the moral of the tale. They mine literature for what the author can make them *feel*.

In the late eighteenth-century, the passions were mined for all their anti-modern potential, but that does not mean that romanticism wasn't modern. It was intensely modern in the

most obvious way possible – in its focus on individual subjectivity and the imagination. It defined a new and modern aesthetic -- a *way of way of feeling* that changed the definition of the artist and liberated art from simple imitation. From here on in, you can't simply appreciate art from a safe spectatorial distance; you are challenged by art to *engage* what the artist feels and what the artist is saying. The artist becomes a *genius of feeling*, the artist taps into the realm of the imagination, and modern culture separates itself from everyday life. Serious art discovers so few imaginative resources in modern society that it begins to hive itself off and create a higher realm of imaginative cultural discourse that is unavailable to everyday life and practice. The task of a more mundane and mediocre relevance is left to popular culture, which is *low* precisely because it is popular. There are lots of paradoxes and ironies associated with this split between high and low culture that you can explore in more advanced humanities and literature courses. But for our purposes, it is sufficient to appreciate the fact that *culture* now becomes something more than good *taste* that anyone can develop. Now you have to perfect your ability to feel imaginatively before you can hope to enter into a relationship with culture. In other words, culture needs to be cultivated in an environment safe from all the corrupting influences of modern life. The humanities programs in universities were designed primarily to effect that delicate cultivation.

Romantic writers may not have started out by wanting to separate culture from society, but their search for *emotional and imaginative truth* suggested a trajectory that would eventually cut the umbilical cord between consciousness and society. In part, this was because the thing the romantic artist of the past, like today's serious rock musician, deplored and feared more than anything else was becoming *mainstream* or a *commodity* co-opted by the machinery of modernity. More critical to the modern separation of art and life, however, was the artist's spurning of anything contaminated by imitation and the association of artistic genius with *originality*. One of the slogans of the modern artist is *art for art's sake* and what's at stake in this slogan is the responsibility for generating unique insights. To the extent that the modern artist sought any membership, it was in a very exclusive club of superior geniuses past and present. If you consider only the realm of high *art* (and by art here is meant everything that falls under the concept of *culture*), you won't really appreciate the contribution that the romantics made to modern culture. However, if you consider that every single one of you probably wants to be considered a unique and original individual, then you have fallen under the spell of the romantic mystique. Nothing in capitalist individualism suggests that you should do anything other than pursue your own material happiness. But romantic individualism wants you to follow other dreams.

### **A Special Way of Feeling**

The romantic reaction begins by investing Nature with enormous significance. It is no longer just the serene and orderly pastoral world of Nature that they are fascinated by, but the rugged, tumultuous, and sublime aspects of Nature. They are fascinated by nature *for its own sake* and they redefine what is *beautiful* in Nature in terms of the awe that it strikes in the beholder. In Book Two of Werther, we move away from tidy fields and the little agrarian communities to the raging rivers, steep precipices and *dark and stormy*

*nights* that have become staples of romantic literature. The essence of Nature, whether sedate in the poems of Wordsworth or raging in the poems of Byron, is that it can only be appreciated *personally*. When contemplating nature, the social world begins to disappear. This allows the romantic artist to focus highly detailed attention to natural description, but much, much more important to *identify* with Nature. Whereas the sentimentalists admired and imitated Nature, the romantics engaged nature.

When you engage something, you incorporate it within yourself. You don't pick and choose qualities so much as you embrace it totally. And, when you embrace Nature totally, spectatorial distancing is impossible; you can no longer determine where you individually leave off and this entity called nature begins. Embracing nature *totally* implies animating nature with yourself, and yourself with nature. This can be described as a *special way of feeling* that can only be experienced emotionally and that cannot be captured rationally. It constitutes an essential and aesthetic experience that cannot be learned, but that can be *cultivated*. An ability to appreciate the essence of natural objects and natural scenes is innate. It is evident in a child's sense of awe or wonderment when looking at the stars. By identifying ourselves with nature, we can regain that profound sense of connection with the natural world that is being lost in modern society. The worship of nature may be *for its own sake*, but it is also a technique for coping with modernity.

The romantics not only wanted to rekindle our identification with the natural world but also to put us in touch with ourselves. We are part of the natural world, and what are most natural in us are our passions. The romantics rediscovered and rehabilitated Shakespeare because his masterful imagery upheld the connection between the natural and the personal world and also because he was, for them, the first and greatest, naturalist of the passions. What is more, Shakespeare was not afraid to describe the strong passions that led Hamlet to despair, Lear to madness, and Macbeth to murder. But the new and improved anatomist of the human passions, and an inspiration to the Romantics was Goethe, who delineated the internal feelings of his protagonist Werther that led to the most anti-social act conceivable – suicide. Another bible of feeling for the romantics was *The Poems of Ossian*, peopled, ironically but revealingly, by weeping warriors, shrieking lovers, and profound nostalgia for a Highland world that was the antithesis of everything modern.

Let's unpack this combination of concepts that usually goes under the name of *romanticism* in order to get a better idea of what we are dealing with and how it still affects us today. Romanticism is a profound metaphysical discontent with society and its relationship to oneself. What does that mean? It means that you have romantic tendencies if you think the rules of society are too restrictive and its values are too sordid. It also suggests that you have a romantic attitude if your ideals for social life are in conflict with the realities that you experience. The appropriate question is: where do these idealistic attitudes originate? Why not simply accept society for what it is rather than hit your emotional head against an experiential brick wall? At least, why not try to modify your expectations as Albert and Lotte beg Werther to at least try to do? The answer given by Werther and every romantic since is that there is only one really

authentic world and that is the world of the *passions*. The passions take precedence over reality; they are the only *facts* that really count. The so-called *real world* should understand and conform to passion, not the other way around.

Passion could be anything, and occasionally it seems to be anything, when Werther defends the murder of his competitor by the would-be peasant suitor and his alter ego. The romantics locate passion more precisely, however, in women, children and, let's not forget, adolescents. Werther is obsessed with children because they are more *natural* in their emotions; childhood is not something wild to be tamed, but is *innocent* and its natural feelings are something to be cultivated. Women also intrigue the romantics precisely because women are deemed to be more natural and sensitive than most men. They reserve special attention for youth, especially in the form of adolescent males like Werther, whose entry into an active social life illuminates most sharply the absurdity of social rules. Not only of social rules, because these might be lived with as expedient arrangements, but of social *attitudes* that define male success and status. We must never forget that, for all the interest in women and children, the control of culture is about power, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, power is all about men. The passions that count are not simply natural feelings but those that are identified and cultivated by *men of genius*. These men are the unique individuals who ought to be the *legislators* to society. The social battleground over which they struggle is the minds of men, and the word that they give to their strategy is *culture*.

## Imagination

Why the emphasis on wild nature and strong passion? If the goal was to rekindle feeling to reform an increasingly unfeeling world, then the romantics clearly failed. Mechanization and competitive capitalism prevailed. But their identification with nature and passion revealed a much more complex agenda – to create a separate and opposed and critical domain of feeling in the individual's *imagination*. And they were infinitely more successful in so far as romantic culture began a process of condemning modern society, its boredom and mediocrity that has continued up to the present. What the romantics realized is that the battle for the modern world is as much psychological as it is physical. What the romantics helped to construct was a modern psychology, where passion and imagination trump reason at every turn.

To focus on Nature unduly is to misunderstand the Romantic Movement. The romantics always paired *nature* and *imagination* together, and imagination was key to appreciating nature and its beauties. The romantics removed imagination from the shackles of the Enlightenment. Reason was condemned primarily because it misunderstood the role played by *fancy* or imagination in life. Whereas politics and economics dominated the national agenda, it overlooked or downgraded the imaginary character of human life. For the first time, there was an impressive domain to be conquered and controlled by the romantic writer and artist. Whereas the Enlightenment sucked the wild, the irrational and the mythical elements out of life, in order to generate order and progress, the romantics

re-occupied and reinvigorated the territory that had been vacated. For the romantics, imagination and nature went hand in hand, and the good, that capitalism defined in utilitarian terms, they redefined as the *beautiful*.

The romantic poet Keats developed the axiom that “truth is beauty, and beauty is truth. That is all you can know and all that you ever need to know.” But what does it mean to equate beauty with truth? It translates into the creation of an entirely new class of writers who are authorized to designate a new and superior truth to the mundane reality that currently surrounds us. Physical nature certainly is the starting point but once you emphasize the *imaginative* faculty with human nature, what can be considered *natural* is absolutely anything that the human being can imagine. In the imagination, human passions need not be qualified by such trivialities as time, place, hunger, tummy aches. They can operate larger than life and strut the stage in all their glory, without the censorship of society. The passions of romantic love are obvious grist for the imaginative writer, and Goethe certainly invests the relationship between Lotte and Werther with an intensity that is so deep that it leads to a suicide that is difficult for the reader to condemn – at least if you buy into the hegemony of passion + imagination. A modern passion that romantic authors explore originates in *The Poems of Ossian* where memory and nature combine to create scenes and situations that have an entirely new designation – the *sublime* – a feeling so awe inspiring and overpowering that the self disappears.

Imagination draws its resources from the past as well as the present. There now emerges a new interest in the literature of the past, especially in legends, fairy tales, and myths as evidence, not of the irrationality or backwardness of the past, but as evidence of the *feelings* of peoples in the past. Under this kind of cultural historical reconstruction, modern society need not represent progress, but actually can signify the destruction of the identity of a people. The cultural values of past communities represented their *spirit*, its special *quality* that cannot not be replaced by any *quantity* of goods. We can easily see in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* the nostalgia for a more meaningful past, where people have a sense of community whose destruction is symbolized by ruined churches or cut down trees. What you have to realize about these contrasts between a more *organic* past and a *mechanical* present (a *gemeinschaft* versus a *gessellschaft*) is that the comparisons are usually not designed to be realistic. The community of the past is a literary community, an *imagined* community, whose identity is designed to appeal to the imagination. The community of choice for many romantics was the community condemned as the *dark ages* by the Enlightenment – medieval feudal society. In literature and art, the medieval world is re-imagined as a community of belonging and religious feeling, where there is no competition because everyone knows their place. Instead of a world of violence, in which examples of barbarism likely outweighed characteristics of civility, it is an imagined world inspired by the ideals of chivalry, and peopled with knights and ladies fair, all of whom just happen to be perfect exemplars of *beauty*.

The characteristic of past societies that the Enlightenment most deplored was superstition. Unenlightened societies believed in demonic forces, angels, ghosts and

fairies. While these may have been anathema to rationalism, they were boons for romanticism precisely because they generated strong feelings of interest and fear and took the reader out of present indifference. The romantics knew how to use fairies to particularly good effect. But, whereas fairy stories like those of the brothers Grimm were designed primarily for children, adults required stronger fare to shake them out of their complacency. Ghosts were ideal, because the more real they were, the more real was the world of the imagination. *The Poems of Ossian* are frequented by ghosts who stalk the land and occasionally shake the clouds and create thunder with their footsteps. While many of them lie silent in their tombs, some of the more romantic warrior ghosts appear to the ones that they love. For love is a romantic feeling that conquers death. Sometimes the dead seem more alive than the living, because those who are living have lost the old community and await their death. It is interesting to consider the impact that *The Poems of Ossian* had across Europe in the 1760s before it was discovered to be a forgery composed by one James Macpherson. It single handedly invented the Scottish Highland tourist industry!

Perhaps the most surprising impact of the ideal of a romanticized past took place in architecture during the 1830s, just after the period we are focusing on in this lecture. Architecture is always interesting to look at because it is the one place where new artistic ideals can go beyond the imaginary and gain a physical foothold in society. The Gothic revival beginning in the 1830s is something that you yourself can see in Ontario nineteenth-century churches with large steeples and ornate features pointing to heaven. The gothic style was a late medieval form of architecture intimately related to Catholic ideas of the relationship between heaven, earth, and the religious community in between. It is the antithesis of modern functionality. The fact that this style caught on in the nineteenth-century, and more surprisingly that it was adopted by many Protestant churches, reflects the widespread cultural desire to construct something more organic, meaningful and imaginative than the utilitarian boxes that served as houses of religious worship. Equally fascinating is the way that the idea of the gothic cathedral was appropriated in the writings of influential art critics like John Ruskin. The architectural motivation was not so much to imitate the gothic style of the medieval church but to capture its essential meaning of an organic connected society with shared values.

The past is not only modernized but also artistically embellished because the romantics had a keen sense of the beautiful. There are a couple of interesting facets to this emphasis on beauty in romantic literature. The first is that you can't possibly define it; you can only experience it. The second is that beauty eclipses everything, including religion and morality, because it does not allow any dogma or regimentation. The third is that the concept of romantic beauty undermines all previous aesthetic theories because it does not have to conform to any specific relationship between form and function, shape and substance. The beautiful need not even demonstrate artistic skill. What it needs to do is to communicate a feeling and, even then, it only needs to communicate that feeling or impression to those few who can appreciate it. Moreover, since the greatest art is always pushing and expanding the limits of emotional experience, we cannot expect it to become popular during the artist's lifetime. In fact, any undue mainstream success is potentially the kiss of death for this new designation for art.



## The Romantic Artist in Society

All of this talk about art leads us to the complex relationship between the romantic artist and society. Make no mistake about it, this is a modern relationship, because the romantic writer is *in* society but he is not supposed to be *of* modern society. Romantic art is anything but a craft or an occupation; it is a *calling*. It is a particularly high calling because its role, if we can talk about roles and romance together, is to critique modernity from a superior vantage point. The calling of the romantic artist is to convey a more essential reality. Unlike the critic of the past, however, the romantic artist does not achieve this end by engaging directly in a critique, moral or otherwise, of modernity. That can safely be left to a new species of individual who has a symbiotic relationship with the artist and who you all know as the *critic*. Rather, the artist's primary relationship with the reader is to convey *pleasure*. This is achieved by the artist's intimate and perhaps intuitive understanding of the basics of human emotional sympathy and his/her imaginative capacity for creating *beauty* that the reader would be unlikely to discover without the aid of the artist.

At the same time that market society is specializing most of its functions, the romantic artist is generalizing ability as *speaking to common experience* and *conveying imaginative truth*. This clearly can be viewed as a humane and a worthwhile task. In an age of crass materialism and a time when the human personality is being fragmented into any number of separate roles and functions, the desire to speak to the holistic personality and the ideal of an organic community was laudable, as it is today. The romantics were at their very best when illuminating the ways that modern mechanistic society destroys the unity between body and soul, mind and spirit. English poets like Shelly and Wordsworth were clear that their *calling* was all about reinstating life, love and relationship. It was for exactly this reason that they constructed an ideal of *culture* as a defense against the mechanistic and calculating tendencies of the age as well as an environment where more humane values could be cultivated.

However, when you read the writings of the romantics about their agenda, a serious reservation might arise. Here is a group of individuals who, for all the right reasons reject the specialization of the age. At the same time, aren't they further fragmenting life, love and relationships by taking art and culture out of lived reality and placing it within a separate sphere or bubble of activity? The most obvious positive aspect of this development is that it provides a base – culture – for a critique of industrialism and technology. The most negative aspect of this development is that it isolates art, emotion and imagination, thereby severely weakening its “dynamic potential” to impact society. You can clearly see the problem is you reflect that culture has become its own, relatively inward looking industry. You can see the problem even more clearly if you consider that culture has been historically appropriated by political and economic elites for its snob or status appeal. Once what constitutes culture is no longer imbedded in the relations of life, it loses its relevance. Humanities and Fine Arts, for example, are the places where these kinds of activities are championed, but consider what is happening at York. The people in Humanities and Fine Arts rarely talk to one another; our Division only survives

really because of its general educational function, and Humanities Departments everywhere are under threat, not because there isn't demand for what we offer – there is – but that we are regarded as a frill as modern specialized professions begin to dominate.

The question that you need to ask of the eighteenth-century and present day romantic is: do they bear some burden of responsibility for the irrelevance of culture to modern life. You'll note that I'm not referring to popular culture here, but a more refined and elite culture that you get in Humanities courses. What is interesting about modern popular culture is that it is so *dynamic* and, while most of it may be mindless pabulum of the Britney Spears and Paris Hilton variety, it must be admitted that popular culture also contains a rich *diversity* of offerings that is more than a replicable commodity. Moreover, popular culture arguably has been much more responsive to gender and ethnic inequalities than what typically constitutes high *culture*. I'm a fan of popular music so pardon me if my examples are musical. They include names like Bjork, Feist, Broken Social Scene, Bob Marley, Baaba Maal, Public Enemy and genres like Blues and Jazz to indicate that the most dynamic and relevant culture over the past 100 or so years has been popular culture.

The tragedy of modern high culture is that, although it continues to produce very fine creations across the spectrum of what is considered to be art, the major influence of romanticism upon art has been to make culture incestuous. We now have a bevy of poets, painters, musicians, and humanities professors who don't communicate with the *public*, with students, or even with one another outside of their particular specialty. Literature in the form of the novel may be partially exempt from this condemnation, but literary criticism certainly is not. If you want to talk seriously about literature at you need to be able to quote theorists like Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and a bevy of others that are virtually unintelligible to anyone who has not been initiated in the jargon. The romantics must bear some responsibility for this because they were the first to define artistic geniuses as apart from and superior to everyday life. And the nineteenth-century university, the model for the present university, built upon this smug and refined understanding of *culture* that became associated with the image of an *ivory tower* too far removed from modern life. University professors have inherited this privileged mantle, but it is wearing a bit thin as governments are only willing to fund relevant research and university administrators are shifting scarce resources to activities with the highest public profile.

The romantic artist is *alienated* and the romantic perspective too easily encourages feelings of estrangement. Alienation is more than a feeling of not belonging or not fitting in (that is anomie). It is a sense of being alien and having one's whole being repressed by society. Arguably such an attitude is far too self-obsessed, adolescent and, as Lotte, Albert and William try to tell Werther, too extreme. Werther is a prototype of the artistic genius who *rejects* the public and political world and *retreats* into the garret or his own private retreat. He finally commits suicide because he can't get what he wants. None of these qualities take away from the sympathy that we feel for him. But there is one fault that Goethe clearly delineates in Werther if you read closely. He takes a little bit too much smug pleasure in his own sense of superiority over ordinary people; the only

ordinary people that he can appreciate are relatively powerless women and children who he stereotypes to fit his romantic creed; his letters reveal the sense of personal power that he feels because he knows that he is more sensitive than other people. The fact that readers could sympathize so completely with Werther only shows how completely human sympathies can be swallowed up in self-righteous egotism. But isn't this kind of egotism, isn't this kind of self-esteem, isn't this sense of personal entitlement entirely modern? And isn't modern life one big adolescence?

### **The Romantic Hero**

The romantic attempt to establish alternate sources of meaning to industrialism, materialism and bureaucracy was well intended and remains worthy of pursuit. Not engaging directly with modernity, but substituting a guerrilla movement, has had more problematic results. Nowhere do the inadequacies of romanticism appear more clearly, however, than in its celebration of egotism. The romantic protagonist becomes a hero primarily because he or she puts personal development ahead of social responsibility. The desire to break through conventional rules and attitudes is so strong in the romantic ethos that it is always in danger of losing its focus. Anti-political and anti-bureaucratic, romanticism nevertheless easily attaches itself to the charismatic leader. The English Romantic, Thomas Carlyle, began his literary career in *Sign of Times* by condemning the mechanistic and calculating ethos of his day and with the powerful insight that political freedom might lead to mental slavery. He ended that same career by putting all his hopes in "the principle of the strong Leader, the Hero, and the subjects who revere him". This all too easy transition illuminates the general impotency of romanticism with respect to social change and the particular danger that romantic attitudes could lead to something much worse than a boring and bureaucratic society. It can lead to a deadly embrace of megalomania. Beethoven was to regret that he composed his romantic symphony *Eroica* with Napoleon Bonaparte in mind. To his credit, he scratched out the dedication when he realized what a power monger little Nappy was. He reflected a dangerous tendency in romanticism. It is certainly no coincidence that the Germans simultaneously embraced romanticism and Adolph Hitler.

Blaming Hitler on romanticism may be a bit extreme because the romantic hero is basically a self-indulgent loner. For now, let's just suggest that it is a possible tendency for romanticism to worship at the shrine of *charisma*. Certainly, even as a young writer, Goethe was far too sophisticated to fall into that trap. So, why don't we go through the development of Werther's character in Book Two to see what the more basic and fundamental characteristics of the romantic hero are? Let's discover together some of the concepts that I was hoping you'd spot with a close reading. I'm assuming that Goethe hit you between the eyes with the fact that this guy is into passion, particularly the passion of *love* and it is only strong feeling that makes him feel alive. We know exactly when he has crossed over from being a sentimental/sensitive male to being a romantic hero. When he says that "Ossian has replaced Homer in my heart", we know that the Greek sense of balance and moderation is gone; strong emotions are in charge.

But perhaps the next thing you might have noticed about Werther is that he's young. After all the title of the book refers to *young Werther* and what this tells you is that romanticism is not only a movement, but also a stage in the individual life cycle. We modern people tend have romantic obsessions about love and romantic interpretations of life in the period following puberty. That's why university professors like to assign the book in first year courses, because they believe that it will speak to you. Werther is a sympathetic character because we expect strong romantic impressions in young people. If he was eighty years old and acted like that, he might not be appealing, unless of course he was an artistic genius. Artistic geniuses are expected to retain their passionate feelings, but we still prefer them to die young like Byron.

There are a many characteristics of the romantic hero that don't have an expiry date. Did you notice, for example, that he thinks of himself and others regard him as a *dreamer*? He's what we today would refer to as a daydreamer. What that means is that he lives more in the world of his own imagination than in reality. What an imaginative character implies is creativity. Creativity is a desired quality at any age, and modern organizations are always looking for creative people. But the world of business wants creativity balanced by common sense. Werther clearly is not cut out to be a businessman; he is a budding romantic artist. As such, Werther is clearly also *alienated* from the real world that he lives in. As the story goes on, he feels more and more removed from social conventions and wants his own mental space. He uses the image of being locked in a cage or confined in a straightjacket. Whether feels disgust for society; he prefers himself to society; but he is also uneasy and occasionally disgusted with himself. He is not happy and one wonders whether he would find happiness even with Lotte. His desire to constantly seek out intense passion makes him susceptible to wonderful highs but also serious downers, what we today would call depression. He tends to drink to stimulate and anaesthetize himself. This is not merely the modern romantic artist, whose habits with drugs and stimulants tends towards excess, but also a more universal modern self that is a veritable roller coaster ride of emotion.

Werther does not only describe himself passively as a dreamer. He also uses two other active words to describe himself. He says that he is a "pilgrim", a "wanderer" and a "ghost". Which of these terms do you think dominates and why? He is a pilgrim because he is searching for a "home" for his "heart". He hopes to find it with a return to his childhood, but the village he grew up in has changed and so has he. His "hopes are shattered". His reverential pilgrimage gets him nowhere. To use the romantic terminology of the sixties "you can never go home again". You might be able to feel at home, and be a pilgrim going somewhere, if you naively believe in modernity like the masses. But your career as a pilgrim is over once you internalize Bob Dylan's famous line "no direction home". So "pilgrim" is out and the romantic hero is doomed to be a "wanderer on this earth". Now to be a wanderer might appear to be a good thing; you are not tied down to anything; you only have responsibility for yourself; you can experience new emotions. But the modern romantic wanderer that Werther sees himself as being is a very lonely soul. He is a stranger even to himself. He can't even hang on to his own emotions. "Sometimes a happier outlook on life tries to struggle to the surface," he says, but "alas, only for a moment".

Once he has reached this point of self-awareness, however, there is no turning back to the hopeful, sociable Werther. If he can't even connect with himself, how can he ever hope to connect to others? He uses the word "ghost" to describe the shattered self that now inhabits the castle of his dreams. He identifies himself with the "dead" and with the specters in the *Poems of Ossian*. The only pilgrimage that now makes sense for our romantic wanderer is the pilgrimage to death. He defines his life as a "gradual death". Now, you might say that he is being a big baby, that his obsession with the grave is morbid, and it all boils down to not getting Lotte. Even Goethe suggests that the suicide might have been averted if Lotte, Albert and Werther really talked this out. In a sense, in terms of common sense, you would be absolutely right. But you would be missing one essential point. The obsession with death, and particularly the *death wish*, is a preoccupation of modern culture. Sometimes the modern preoccupation with death is evidenced negatively, in the ways that we moderns hide from it and try to sweep it under the carpet. But in literature, a new perspective on death has become iconic.

Prior to modernity, death was contained and contemplated in and as a *social fact*. But modern death is an intensely individual experience even for those who have religious faith. The self confronts death without any social intermediary. Werther already inhabits a modern world in which good and evil are highly ambiguous matters of personal choice. He contemplates his death, not merely as the end of his earthly existence, but as the potential end of his universe. The very inevitability of his death cannot help but render his life somewhat absurd. The biographical evidence suggests that Goethe, even when he disowned his romantic creation, was convinced that the issue of death was becoming a central concern of modernity. In a work entitled *Reflections on Werther*, he suggested something quite astonishing about modern suicide. He suggested that there were two distinct alternatives for the truly modern psyche, either 1) to choose life over death where life was defined by *action or creation* or 2) choose death over life where life had become wearisome to the sensitive individual. There was no exit from this choice unless it was to accept a *living death*.

The romantic personality contributes to the modern psyche in its approach to death and suicide. Life and death become a real personal choice even if that choice boils down to acting without any guarantee of meaning. The major dilemma of the modern age is that we are painfully aware that the consequences of action are unpredictable. We'll be hearing a lot more the way that death became the threshold and horizon of meaning for modern writers. Those of you who have strong religious or humanistic values may well disagree with this emphasis. For you in particular I would suggest that nothing in modernity prevents you from *choosing* to embrace religious or moral values. But modernity clearly presents this as a choice rather than a given. Moreover, while religious and moral values may provide your lives with meaning, you may want to consider the extent to which these beliefs are *your* ultimate threshold and horizon rather than dynamic and activating principles. You may very well energize your entire being in the world with these principles, but modern consciousness does not make that an easy or straightforward task.

I want to end this discussion of the suicidal Werther on a more optimistic note, by pointing out that, while the modern self puts modern suicide on the map, the decision to take one's own life, as Goethe remarks, is a relatively rare occurrence. It is not even a consideration for most people. But it will be a point of reflection for many of those who embrace a distinctly modern culture and seek to contribute to it. The fact that many so-called geniuses and creative people are prone to suicidal depression speaks volumes for the penetration of romantic ideas. Show me a romantic individual who has never considered suicide at least at a trivial level, and I'll show you someone that is not really romantic. The point Goethe wants to make is to take all that teenage angst and to put it into something productive.

Humanities courses often ignore psychological, sociological and anthropological discussions of modernity. But the French sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote a fascinating book on modern suicide, suggesting that it was better understood as a *social fact* than an individual choice. What he suggested was that the number of suicides jumped significantly in urban societies characterized by specialization. These modern suicides might all have particular psychological causes but exploring those causes would not help you to understand the root cause of the increase in suicides. A modern society requires specialization to function; specialization can't be dictated from above; more than anything else, it requires the individual freedom to discover one's personality and talents and to find a place to fit in. The individual does not come ready made as the building block of society; society *creates* the individual when society needs to maximize individual differences. What does any of this have to do with suicide? Durkheim points out that when you encourage people to make their own choices, some will find ways to fit in while others will not. Those who don't, especially in societies where the opportunities for talent are restricted, will become alienated. Some of them will commit suicide. Rather than being a bad thing, says Durkheim, if you look at the big picture, this is a good outcome. When the suicide rate increases, it means that the individual is free to make his or her own choices and the fit between self and society becomes more interesting. The modern world is an interesting place, and freedom is a wonderful thing. That it leads a few sensitive creatures to alienation and suicide is regrettable, but the alternative is being forced to do whatever society desires. A free society, if it is to really call itself free, must make room for suicide.

### **The Spirit of the Nation**

There is one last legacy of the Romantic Movement that I would like to consider that is largely excluded from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and that is the connection between the romantics and nationalism. There is an indirect relationship between Goethe's novel and German nationalism, because *The Sorrows of Young Werther* along with Goethe's other works provided the fragmented German states with a cultural focus for unification. Today, if you want to learn about French culture and civilization, you go to the French Institute. If you want to learn about German culture, you go to the Goethe institute.

But there isn't much of a blueprint for nationalism in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* other than a kind of naïve identification with the peasantry in the countryside. In many

romantic works, in music and in art, however, a powerful national sentiment figures quite prominently. Sentimentalism was cosmopolitan like the Enlightenment, but romanticism spoke to and created a fundamental sense of patriotic passion. In part, this was because the romantic writers focused their attention of nature and human nature, not in the urban centers, but in the local environment. In part, it was because they focused on folk music and oral culture as a more genuine reflection of feeling. The one enlightenment insight that the romantics took seriously is that customs and manners were formed nationally, i.e. within geographical boundaries. This naturally formed organic community defined authentic identity rather than a more artificial and corrupt civilization.

This romanticizing of the regions over the metropolis was a cultural development with considerable political implications. Modern nation states had been emerging at least since the Tudor Revolution in England; but they were economic and administrative units rather than coherent entities. Like many third world countries today, these *countries* contained fragmented, even tribal, elements. For truly modern nation states to emerge as coherent and coordinated identities, a culture of nationalism was necessary. The need was most profound in Germany, whose disunity made it the whipping post of more centrally coordinated and administered countries. Romanticism provided both the national literature and the passionate identification with the national topography that the nation state lacked. Ironically, an appreciation of the political significance and implication of cultural nationalism made romanticism hugely popular in the very urban areas and political circles that the Romantics condemned. There was a huge public for romantic writings and much of it was urban.

A new and intense view of love, as a very private and personal passion, was clearly central to and definitive of romanticism. But romantic love has limitations. It appealed primarily to the young. But the love of one's country has much more extension. What the romantics achieved, that probably could not have been achieved in any other way, was to elevate an imaginative idea and ideal of the nation into enormous functional significance. They gave nations an identity and reinvigorated patriotism on a national scale. In Germany, the key figures were the Brother's Grimm, who collected German fairy tales and epics. Scottish sentimentalism and the rehabilitation of the Highlands got a head start in *The Poems of Ossian*. But the great period of cultural nationalism followed the French Revolution and, especially the Napoleonic Wars, when romantic pens were enlisted in the cause of rebellion and independence. Romance and freedom entered into an alliance that continues to this day.

What romantic writers did was not only to construct a national literature that could claim that it spoke to everyone connected by language and geography, but also they invented a recognizably modern *nation* by strenuously ignoring any existing *public* in order to speak directly to the *people*. And they went beyond any real limitations that the people might have by idealizing the *spirit of the people* that lay beneath and beyond the actual populace. Romanticism linked this ideal past, present and future in an indissoluble chain of identity that had enormous emotional appeal. Just how much appeal can be seen by the willingness of individuals to shed their blood for their country.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of romanticism, therefore, was not limited to a literature that embraced nature and championed love. It helped to define the modern self and its obsessions, including the obsession with death. Romanticism constructed a utopian ideal of culture and civilization that condemned the mechanistic and calculating character of modern life, thereby removing the artist, if not to the garret, then at least to a sideshow of the main currents of modernity. But that same romantic ideal of culture helped create one of the central institutions of modern society – the university – and, while under threat from specialization and expediency, those cultural values are still very far from being extinguished. Perhaps the most powerful legacy of romanticism, and arguably the one least confined to Europe and its Atlantic colonies, is its contribution to nationalism. Nationalism is double edged. Beginning with Napoleon, it aided and abetted the domination of less powerful regions but more advanced nations. But it also provided a powerful motivation for exploited populations to resist oppression and to create their own destiny. All people seeking to the freedom to form themselves “in accordance with their own particular quality”; every independence movement; every appeal to patriotism; every attempt at self-direction owes something to romanticism.



## The Masters of Reality

### The Romantics Revisited

Outside of literature and the fine arts, the romantics got something of a *bum rap* during the nineteenth century because their writings went against the dominant grain of thought, which was *realism* backed by all the force of modern science. As a complete package scientific realism often went under the title of *positivism*, with the assumption that anything counter to scientific realism was negative. Positivism had much bigger fish to fry than romanticism, it completely rejected theology (religion) and metaphysics (most philosophy) in favour of knowledge built on the *real* – natural phenomena explored by scientific observation. We are now at the crossroads where scientism and realism become the privileged ways of understanding. The artist retreats to the garret, but the scientists own the house.

The term *romantic* now ceases to reflect its twofold character as: 1) an important critique of the shortcomings of industrial society and 2) a plea for a more holistic human being whose feelings and imagination have a place. It is negatively contrasted with *realism* as something hopelessly naïve, intellectually fuzzy, and largely irrelevant to what is really going on in the world. The new masters of reality have little time for anything that smacks of romanticism, except as a private indulgence or a product for leisure-time consumption. With the spread of positivism and realism, the complex nature of romantic thought gets lost. Whereas poets like Shelly, Keats and Wordsworth were involved in the politics of their day, and often had a very accurate sense of contemporary issues, they are increasingly relegated in the minds of those who count as a purely literary genre with spin offs for tourism (nature) and popular romances for women.

The romantics themselves were partly to blame for their own irrelevance. Romanticism lacked any unified program and its specifics could be highly contradictory. But, as Jacques Barzun suggests, one of the strengths of romantic writing was precisely that it allowed for diversity; it brought multiple perspectives to issues and allowed for imaginative possibilities, even if many of them were naïve. More serious defects were the tendencies in romanticism towards elitism and its defensive separation of culture from society. Nowhere was this tendency more pronounced than with respect to a new class of people that modern society was generating – the working class. To give the romantics their due, writers like Wordsworth were among the first to pay attention to ordinary people and to recognize genuine beauty and feeling in village and folk culture. You can't really accuse the romantics, at their best, of ignoring people. But the romantics inbred elitism combined with their disgust with industrial society led them to ignore, except perhaps as victims, the working class. While they were the sharpest critics of industrial society and its stultifying effects, they had no communication with the working class. Their products were suitable only for middle class consumption. Many of them were horrified by the prospect of the working class increasing their power. If social reform were to occur, then it had to come from above and not below.

## Scientific Dreams

Like him or hate him, arguably the most influential thinker of the nineteenth century was Karl Marx. Marx highlighted the major contradictions of industrial capitalism and offered a socialist solution that until a few decades ago was *the* alternative to be reckoned with. But we need to give credit where credit is due. The writers of the Romantic Movement that provided Marx with much of his critique of bourgeois society and even his idea of communism would have been inconceivable without the romantic inspired socialism of writers like Fourier. If you read their works carefully and extensively, you will discover that the Romantics canvassed some interesting, even realistic, solutions to the problems of their time. Writers influenced by romantic ideals were the early adopters of socialism. The fact that Karl Marx dismissed some of these solutions as *utopian* should not obscure the fact that the Romantic Movement paved the way for his own *socialist system*. And, like the romantics, a great deal of the appeal of Marxism was that it echoed the pain felt by flesh and blood human beings who were caught up in the profound change to an industrial society. Additionally, it plotted alternatives to the pain – a happy ending future.

What made Marxism successful and relegated other forms of socialism to a historical footnote were several characteristics completely lacking in the writings of the romantics. The first was the embracing of change not only as inevitable but also as a positive force. *The Communist Manifesto* absolutely thrills with change. Change is a good thing because it destroys all the feudal and outdated ideas of the past. It is exhilarating; you get a sense of the dynamism of a changing society in which “all that is solid melts into air”. And it is, above all, positive in so far as we are relentlessly on a pace to a future that looks to contain all sorts of possibilities that were inconceivable in the past. Marx clearly invokes the Enlightenment belief in material progress; knowledge and industry can lead, not to a romantic *utopia*, but a realistic one. But whereas most Enlightenment theorists expected change to be slow and steady, and feared a return to barbarism, Marx believes that the nature of change in modern society is no longer gradual but *revolutionary* and that its dynamic is unstoppable. This belief in absolutely unstoppable revolutionary change is entirely modern.

It is no simple matter to design a realistic utopia freed completely from an oppressive and ideological past. Marx may be intelligent, but it must be said that he dips into the past rather selectively in order to propel us into a future that bears little resemblance to the present. The only way that he could possibly carry his readers along with him is by appealing to a set of ideas that are not so much logical as a set of beliefs. Here again, however, Marx is entirely modern and it is modern *beliefs*. By deconstructing these beliefs we can see just how modern Marx is. Primary among these beliefs is the absolute and dogmatic acceptance of scientific realism. Whereas in his early writings Marx had been as much a romantic as a realist, by the time he came to write *The Communist Manifesto* he wanted nothing to do with any ideas that he thought were *utopian*. Utopian ideas and ideals were based too much on feeling and imagination, what was necessary was a thoroughgoing appreciation for the *reality*. The particular reality that he embraced was the overwhelming reality of material life. Now, material life could conceivably

mean a lot of things, but in the nineteenth-century, *material life meant economic reality* as discovered by the new science of political economy. Marx went much further than the classical economists, however, by suggesting that economics was everything. Ideas and ideals were irrelevant in comparison to economics or the material relations of life except as ideological instruments by which one economic class dominated others.

It is difficult to see how modern thought could function without the concept of *ideology*. Ideology implies that all individual ideas, political ideas and cultural ideas have their foundation in material interest. Not only do societies create religious and other ideas to give their experience meaning, but also those who have power in society generate ideas that reinforce that power. Modern thought, including what is known as postmodern thought, rips the halo off everything in order to reveal *what is really going on*. Every idea, every position, every authority is subject to this unveiling. The reason that Marx did this unveiling better than everyone is because he was willing to trace the origin of every idea to material self interest. The capitalists were not the only ones to lose their halo as the champions of freedom of freedom. Marx argued that their chief ideal of free trade, which they may or may not genuinely believe in, was really the freedom of capitalists to make money and to exploit others. But Marx also underlined the ideological nature and effectively deconstructed all thought, every idea, every position, past and present. A world where all that constitutes subjective truth is subject to criticism and change is a very modern world.

Marx helped shape our modern *real* world by ruthlessly debunking it of anything ideological or utopian. To the extent that he was critical of this real material world, he believed that we needed to accept it and to travel through it. The path he chose was a modern path that you all recognize – a theory of evolution. The Marxist system embraced a scientific theory of evolution by way of Charles Darwin. Theories of evolution have a long history. In the Enlightenment, evolutionary theories were used to plot and plan progress towards a more rational society. They certainly didn't dismiss the importance of individual ideas. The difference after Darwin is that evolution is a process that has everything to do with the material struggle for species survival and nothing to do with such flighty entities as ideas and ideas. Biologically speaking, human beings are merely the by-products of the competition for scarce resources. Socially speaking, Marx argued, the struggle for survival revolved around the control of the *mode of production* in economic life. Marx dedicated the first volume of his famous work *Das Capital* to Darwin, not because he got the idea of competitive struggle and survival of the fittest entirely from Darwin, but because Darwin made it profoundly clear to Marx that material life rather than *human consciousness* was decisive.

When you examine Marx's writings carefully, you discover a series of concepts all tied together in a system that has one enormous problem. That problem is not exclusive to Marx but is shared by all so-called *scientific* or *realistic* theories in the nineteenth-century. It is all tied together by the dogmatic belief that material life is all that counts, that material life follows definitive laws, that science can discover those laws, and that by privileging a scientific approach we will usher in *utopia*. Utopia formerly meant *nowhere* or *no place*. But now it is supposed to be a very real place. While the route to utopia

might not be very pleasant, ultimately progress is assured. That progress is not the result of individual effort or ideas that are largely inconsequential, but material and social forces. And the social is best understood as a mirror or reflection of the material. Put in this way, Marx and most of nineteenth-century thought may very well appear the antithesis of what it professed to be. Instead of being realistic, it easily veers into a kind of mysticism, of which the religion of science and technology is the most obvious example.

But the hold of nineteenth century scientific conceptions on the human imagination, and their impoverished definition of reality, has been as tenacious as it is influential. Most serious scientists no longer believe that we can discover nature's laws and that the only rule is uncertainty, the unexpected or even the chaotic. But many people still worship at the shrine of technological progress and you would be hard pressed to diminish their belief that technology can solve any problem that it creates. Economics is still treated as if it is a science even though its ability to predict anything has been questioned. The now global rather than national market economy is regarded as a force that must be obeyed despite any adverse human consequences and flesh and blood human beings are still defined rational economic actors whose sole motivations are the competition for survival or utility. Perhaps it is time to re-discover and reassess the romantics!

### **Marx on the Market**

It is easy to dismiss Marxism now that the socialist alternative to market capitalism has dissipated and globalization is triumphant. But as long as the market continues to dominate our lives, Marx's brand of realism will remain relevant. Even if neither of the two primary modern versions of economic realism – capitalism and socialism -- offer a full picture of what it means to be a human being, Marx's critique of capitalism exposes the human shortcomings of the economic market in ways that have yet to be surpassed. You don't have to *buy into* the Marxist system completely to discover its power. What the emergence of market capitalism revealed, and what debates about religion and philosophy obscured, says Marx is the fact that economic realities have dominated people's lives, the political history of societies, and even these society's most precious cultural values. This stark fact, indisputable if not uttered too dogmatically, is Marx's most profound contribution to modernity. Yet, this fact had been almost totally obscured by the self-representations of social relations and culture in the past. The cultural blinkers, the rose coloured classes, were being lifted by a group that had barely existed historically and had even been socially stigmatized in the recent past – the capitalist or bourgeois class. This was the dynamic class who were changing the world and social relations in their image. What was that dynamic image? – the crude cash nexus of the marketplace. Marx pointed out that the term *human* no longer had any significant meaning apart from the commodification of the marketplace and the division of labour that it engendered. All that was really important was the role you played, either as someone with capital and power or someone that was exploited by capital and power. All the hierarchies of the past that obscured the economic basis of human relationships were being exploded by the most dynamic members of the bourgeoisie – the industrial class.

The rise of the market revealed that the foundation of every past society had been its economy – the way it produced and distributed goods. The industrial capitalist made all other distinctions superfluous; either one put capital in motion or one was put into motion by the capital of others. The system was predicated on competition or the struggle for survival between capitalists because without profits or growth came economic death. In this self-absorbed struggle for survival, however, Marx believed that what you and I call businessmen were constructing the conditions for a new evolutionary stage in society, one in which human relations were no longer submerged in economic relations, but one in which the utopian schemes of the past might actually become a reality. But in order for that to happen, it would be necessary to embrace change, revolutionary change.

Together with his friend, factory owner, and supplier of funds, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx consolidated his ideas in a lively little pamphlet called *The Communist Manifesto*. It would be difficult to imagine any pamphlet, past or present that has had the impact of *The Communist Manifesto* which was published in the 1840s. In the words of one commentator, it was a work “brilliantly conceived and executed”. It was both an intellectual *tour de force* and a highly effective piece of propaganda. Over a hundred and fifty years later, it still remains one of the most important works in European literature. What is this spell that *The Communist Manifesto* still holds even today? It is of course fairly accessible to the man or woman of average intelligence and this fact, in part helps to explain its appeal. But it is the content rather than the form that tells us why this work has received such a positive – and negative – response from its readers. And that content is essentially a wholesale re-interpretation of human history in terms of the eventual success of working people in establishing an equal, classless, and fulfilling society. What Marx did was to blend the nineteenth-century theory of evolution and eighteenth-century ideals of progress and freedom with an entirely novel emphasis on the emerging social class who could conceivably construct the brave new world – the working class. Whereas the romantics could only dream of reform from above, the followers of Marx could anticipate revolution from below.

*The Communist Manifesto* is one of the first works to view the lower classes of society as historically significant. This group had been largely left out of the reckoning by previous theoreticians and philosophers. But these same individuals were the heroes in Marx’s conception of historical evolution. What is more, their eventual victory was assured by historical laws that were as valid for economics as Darwin’s theory was for biology. The working class, the most oppressed and/or ignored group in the past – typically invisible or regarded as a nuisance – was going to inherit the earth. That earth would be one in which most oppression and injustice would cease. Men would finally live in a non-competitive environment and would begin to treat one another as brothers and sisters. And the true, unbridled, nature of *humanity and culture* could at last be fulfilled. Of course, I’m getting carried away here. There isn’t a great deal of this brotherhood and fulfillment stuff in *The Communist Manifesto* but all of that provides the psychological subtext of a trumpet blast for freedom that ends with the famous line “nothing to lose but their chains”.

You can see the brilliant strategy at work here. The psychological appeal is idealistic, even utopian, but the argument unfolds itself as anti-utopian by someone who has mastered the language of realism. Marx wanted to sell his system as an entirely realist analysis of history and human experience. The equal and free society that Marx envisioned was not something to be hoped for romantically, but was the necessary end product of human experience. By accepting the system, not merely as a realistic model or possibility, but real, you do away with any ambiguity. History is on your side.

### **Class and Individual**

Marx is rightly famous for providing the first rigorous concept of *class*. It is partly thanks to him, that terms like *middle class* and *working class* entered our modern vocabulary, even if some of us today don't swallow Marx's theory of the inevitability of class conflict. For Marx, the conflict between the working class and the capitalist class was an historical inevitability because of their differential access to power and resources. Many today still use the concept of class, but not everyone views conflict as inevitable because classes are not fixed. Some believe that the modern market provides everyone with the opportunity to rise in the economic order. Others believe that these opportunities are exaggerated and that the realistic chances for social mobility are slim, as seems to be born out by the most recent statistical information. They point to the increasing economic gap between the very rich and the very poor.

But whatever one's politics terms like *class* that is defined overwhelmingly in economic terms is used all the time today. We don't always realize what a conceptual innovation it was to deploy those terms systematically and to highlight the different interests that economic classes might have. Why should we use terms like class at all? Aren't there all different kinds of people in society? What class, for example, do university professors belong to? And aren't we all individuals anyway? You might feel this way, but you'd be hard pressed to do away with the concept of class because it tells us so much even if it seems to leave out a lot.

Does it ever leave out a lot! Let's look a bit more closely at the way Marx defines the classes in modern society. The capitalist class that he greatly admires by the way for revolutionizing production and creating a global society are the people who control the *mode of production*. How do they exercise control? With their capital? What is overwhelmingly the mode of production that Marx is interested in? It is factory production. This use of class focuses on one specific sector – the industrialist. It leaves out people who invest in land and agriculture. It leaves out traders or what were called merchants. People that you might want to call middle class – like shopkeepers, professors, and artists – really aren't of much analytical interest for Marx, except for the fact that they often sink into the working class or *proletariat*. When Marx wrote around 1850, industrialization was still in its infancy. But what Marx clearly saw happening very quickly was an industrial society and it was industrial capital that fascinated him.

By focusing on the most dynamic sectors and evolutionary potential of economic classes, Marx was able to dismiss historical complexities in order to keep his eye on the classes

that counted in the present, and especially in the future. Consider his analysis of the working class. Remember that this is the class in *The Communist Manifesto* who are supposed to inherit the earth. The only people that 'count' as the working class are people who work in factories in cities. Farm labourers not only don't count, but Marx refers to them as *rural idiots*. The low lifes, the unemployed, the criminal subculture of the city don't count, Marx refers to them as the *lumpen proletariat* and he doesn't have much sympathy for them at all. There are others that do count but might not seem to have anything in common with workers, i.e. intellectuals, writers and thinkers. What makes intellectual workers, workers like any other, is the fact that they are all dominated by the market mode of production because they don't have independent capital.

What unities the capitalist and the working classes despite all their differences, is that they are part of a *modern world*. That modern world is literate, urban and, above all, embraces industrial and technological progress. This commonality is temporary for one overridingly modern reason. The capitalist class cannot be the class of the future because they are ultimately NOT PROGRESSIVE. They are progressive up to a point; they've changed the world; but they are stuck in a backward looking mindset. They are only interested in profits and their only strategy is competition. If one really embraces change and progress, a self-interested class that maximizes profits for itself, cannot possibly be the class of the future. This realization, i.e. that market competition is by no stretch of the imagination the most efficient guarantor of continuing progress, is what makes Marx the opponent of capitalism. The fact that capitalism is unfair, and is recognized as unfair by educated workers, is an important catalyst of revolution. But capitalism's inefficiency that will ultimately sink it, as I'll try to explain in the next section.

The communist strategy is always and at all times to support capitalism when it is progressive. But once capitalism has developed the mode of production, its spirit is no longer modern. If Marx were alive today and commenting on the world that capitalism has created, he would not be impressed by how much we have accomplished but how little progress we have made. His chief complaint, I think, would be that capitalism has not developed the *individual*. Now, it may seem paradoxical to suggest that a communist would complain about the absence of individualism. But, if you read *The Communist Manifesto* as a modern rather than narrowly political treatise what you discover is a very modern conception of the individual. The world that Marx is eager to get to, and the world that modern technology should strive for, is a world where most of the necessities of life are provided and in which *individuals can finally develop themselves* free of material constraints. This may be a utopian vision, but it is a modern vision. Marx is not in any way interested in a communist future where everyone's actions will be dictated by the common consensus. The only action that he is interested in is the elimination of private property. And what he means by *private property* are those class-based institutions that get in the way of individual freedom.

I realize that describing Marx as a champion of freedom is not a typical way of describing his agenda, but it is inescapable once you embrace his modern vision. The mistake that a capitalist society makes is making an entirely false equation between property and freedom that, while it may have been true of the past, has little relevance for a future in

which the material conditions of life will be provided for *everyone*. Consider, says Marx, that even the person with private property in capitalist society is not genuinely free. He or she lives in fear of others taking away that property; he or she's consciousness is pulverized by profit, which is a pretty narrow vehicle for the development of a holistic personality; and society as a whole, based as it is on conflict, is not the kind of place most people would like to live.

Marx is a *developer* but is a serious error to think that he is only concerned about material development. You have to embrace materialism and pay attention to even the darkest realities, but there is a pay off that makes communism worth fighting for – a world in which *individuals can develop their own capacities* freely and without oppression. Marx doesn't talk much about what it would be like to live in a future communist society. He occasionally jokes about blending fishing with writing, but that doesn't give us much to go on. Is this so surprising? Human society has been dominated by economics and our consciousness has been chained by ideology. A future society in which consciousness is free and anything but communal is impossible to describe. It is a utopian future of course, and it depends on a lot of things going to historical plan. It assumes that capitalism will not be able to manage contradictions and grossly underestimates its dynamism and ability not only to absorb contradictions but also to make them work to its advantage. It supposes a rosy future in which the absence of economic conflict translates into no conflict, either without or within the human psyche. Marx's definition of freedom perhaps underestimates the attachment to domination and power in the human psyche, even a psyche that is liberated from material want. Ultimately, the master of reality may be a victim of his own utopianism. But that is a very different kind of criticism than suggesting that individuality will be stifled in a communist world. Not so. And no attempt to blame Russian, Chinese or any other historical form of so-called *communism* will ever make it so.

## Marxist History

In order to get a better handle on Marxism as a historical prediction or, if you like, a projection, we need to explore the mechanics of what Marxist scholars call *dialectical materialism*.

Marx's theory of history (called *dialectical materialism*) suggested that communism was the inevitable end product of a long historical process. Individuals or groups could not prevent it from arriving; at best they could help speed up the process.

The evolutionary dynamic of history is a structural economic conflict that exists in every society but that has been masked in past societies by *ideology*. All historical culture is ideological. All past thought has been ideological.

Marx was a German and Germans took their history very seriously. According to Marx, all human history should be understood as the conflict between the economic classes.



Every society in history contained economic classes; every community contained oppressors and oppressed with different access to resources. In the societies of the past, this oppression was masked by religion or *ideology*. While the feudal aristocracy exploited the peasant classes in medieval society, for example, this exploitation was hidden by religion. God had created a *great chain of being* in which everyone formed a link. The feudal lord or knight received the homage and obedience of the peasant in return for military protection and aid in times of famine or sickness. The economic exploitation was very real – how many of you would like to be a peasant? – but culturally concealed. The oppressed had false consciousness to the extent that few of them realized the extent to which they were being exploited or even the economic reality that permitted exploitation.

This highly reductionist view of history and mind to economic forces is meant to be materialistic and scientific. It probably places way too much emphasis on economic *praxis*. We don't need to accept it absolutely in order to appreciate its dramatic and salutary inversion of traditional viewpoints privileging ideas and ideals. It was perhaps inevitable that some modern thinker would attempt a revolution of this kind. What is particularly useful about this particular inversion is the way that illuminated a reality that had been obscured by the powerful and their apologists. It shone a light on exploitation and conflict in the past, not only the exploitation of workers, but also women and children. Marxist historians have reappraised history in all kinds of useful ways by looking for that exploitation and conflict and focusing for the first time on history's losers as well as winners. But Marx's focus was immanently modern in so far as even his historical theories were focused much more on the present and the future than the past. It was not the oppression by the feudal aristocracy or patriarchal males that Marx was *primarily* interested in. His primary interest was the capitalist or industrialist class – the group that he used the French term *bourgeoisie* for. Marx summed up the history of this class in very short order, condensing the developments of hundreds of years in a matter of paragraphs. He pointed out that the bourgeoisie originated as suppliers of luxury goods, through long distance trade, for the aristocracy. Although this group was *created* by the aristocracy to serve their own needs, it would eventually become their gravediggers. In the survival of the economic fittest, they were mammals versus dinosaurs; once they amassed wealth or critical mass; their philosophy of market freedom would chip away at the power of the aristocracy, which was exactly what was happening in Marx's Germany when he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. The progress of the bourgeoisie began as a gradual and evolutionary process. First, they established free towns; next they supported absolute monarchs in their bid to curb the excessive power of the nobility; and finally, with the establishment of the modern industrial state, they entered into a *revolutionary* phase. Not only did they wrestle control from the landed aristocracy, but also they transformed the state into their own tool and the world into their market.

Nothing could have stopped this historical evolution. Nothing can stop economic progress. Capitalism for Marx was the most progressive, revolutionary, dynamic force the world had ever seen. Marx himself never hid his admiration for businessmen. He believed that this class had changed the face of the earth in ways that no previous society could have imagined. They developed the towns and the factories; they revolutionized

production; they established world markets; they did away with antiquated institutions and traditional practices and, most important, they made the economy or *mode of production* of social goods more capable of supporting the entire population comfortably than any other previous economic system. They were the only group in human history to establish a firm foundation, if not the present reality, for a decent standard of living and relative economic freedom for all. The bourgeoisie had done something else of equal significance. They created the first truly economic *ideology* or system of values. Although this was ideological in the sense of empowering the bourgeoisie, it played a crucial role in cutting away all the sentimental and religious claptrap that conned men and women into subservience. For the first time, it was clear that the economy dominated life. For the first time, it was possible to see the highly exploitative nature of the system.

The bourgeoisie wrestled power from the owners of land, but like the aristocrats before them, they created and educated their own gravediggers – the working class. The factory system that is synonymous with industrial capitalism, the need to concentrate resources and establish a sophisticated division of labour, the desire to turn everyone into a disciplined appendage of the machine, resulted in the creation of a homogenous class of workers. Agricultural labourers, Marx's *rural idiots*, who were formerly isolated according to local customs, traditions and geography were now brought together into the modern urban centers in order to work in the factories. In their political struggles with the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie educated workers in the issues of the day and in the reality of class conflicts. They were able to communicate more easily with one another, to recognize their own class interests, and to organize to defend them. The system of roads and other forms of transportation, which served the needs of industry, allowed workers in one area to identify and converse with those in another. Marx was nothing if not prescient (forward looking). He saw these processes as continuing, with provincial and even national barriers eroding as capitalism and the market spread its tentacles. He welcomed the emergence of an international working class that mirrored a capitalism that was international in nature.

Those who consider Marx and Marxism to be irrelevant in today's environment should reflect that it was precisely global capitalism that he was anticipating. Developments that he thought would occur in decades have taken over a century and a half. This being the case, what Marx had to say about the nature of globalization and corporatization may yet be relevant. Particularly relevant, of course, have been his analysis of the contradictions in bourgeois market society, that did in *real fact* almost lead to its destruction. Where Marx's breathless ride through history was particularly defective was in overestimating the ideological commitment of the bourgeoisie to free trade in a pure. Marx's competitive scenario leads inevitably to a beleaguered capitalist rump facing a mass of exploited and alienated workers. It is easy to overestimate the bourgeois belief in free markets, but the reality is that capitalists are much more adaptable than Marx thought. They are not as committed to free markets as they are to safe profits. Thus, they are more inclined to adopt strategies that control markets in their favour, as well as to relinquish power judiciously when necessary. It is surprising that Marx invested so much of his own theory in the ideological construction that is free trade and market competition.

In any case, Marx's argument is that the market system is *visibly* oppressive and inefficient. It breeds crisis and foment conflict with those whom it oppresses. Eventually it must inevitably lead to its own overthrow. The gravediggers of capitalism according to Marx are the working class and, by the time that a revolutionary situation occurs, competition will have reduced the bourgeoisie to a very small but very rich group; the working class that Marx liked to call the *proletariat* will be very large, urban and educated, its ranks being inflated by the *petit bourgeoisie* or small time capitalists who are unable to compete in an increasingly harsh and essentially Darwinian struggle for survival. Those well-educated failures of the capitalist system will provide the working class with capable leadership.

The struggle between the bourgeoisie and workers will start off slowly. Marx condenses history into a few paragraphs, but his analysis is not wrong-headed as far as the past was concerned. It began as small-scale opposition by individuals or particular groups, and it did eventually lead pan industry and later pan national risings. At first, workers did look backwards rather than forward. They demanded a return to traditional ideas of fairness or customary relationships. Craftsmen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, for example, sought to restore the guild-like structure of the past; peasants and factory hands may destroy the machines as the Luddites did. Eventually, Marx believed the working class movement would see itself as the vanguard of a more positive progress and, contrary to halting change, will seek to further revolutionize and advance the means of production to establish a truly modern and fair society. Heady stuff indeed! It goes without saying that it hasn't happened yet. Ironically, Marxist propaganda probably helped to get the most intelligent workers on the side of industrialization and modern technology. There is no doubt that Marx himself approved of the machine age and would probably even welcome our computer age. Of course, he would have wanted these innovations to be harnessed for the good of the entire society rather than the profit of a few.

Crucial to Marx's reform program is the spread of class-consciousness. Throughout *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx argues that workers must and will come to think of themselves as a class with interests that are in opposition to those of capitalists. This class-consciousness would not be created by intellectuals, propagandists or even the *Manifesto* itself. It would be generated by the forces of production and the social relations that necessarily emerged from them. The best that someone like Marx, or those other middle class intellectuals – who recognized the pattern of history – could do was to help the struggle along. But intellectuals and propagandists could not create or prevent the ensuing revolution. It would come in any case. The future was as assuredly on the side of the working class as mammals replacing dinosaurs.

Remember the fact that it didn't happen doesn't necessarily mean that it couldn't happen in the future. But it certainly looks a lot less likely now, at least in the advanced nations, because most people are comfortable with capitalism and not as eager to embrace revolutionary change as Marx thought. In addition, the capitalist system was able to slowly increase the standard of living for a large sector of the population. Finally, the need for capitalism to grow has given rise to a consumer society where freedom and

individualism are confounded with the ability to purchase goods of choice. Such behaviour bears absolutely no resemblance to Marx's idea of freedom as the full development of personality. In fact, in his early writings, Marx warned against the *fetishism of commodities*, which he regarded as a sign of and a substitute for a more profound alienation.

Marx's theory of alienation remains valid albeit not perhaps in its original form. Like Adam Smith and many other writers, Marx was concerned that industrial labour was characterized by mindless tasks. Capitalism, the most dynamic and productive economic system in history, turned the worker into a machine and deprived him/her of the fruits of labour. Being a cog in a machine might not be so bad if technology shared the useful product, minimized necessary labour, and, most of all, maximized the leisure to develop oneself. Today, alienation takes different forms, for example: 1) in underpaid service jobs that require few skills and make a mockery of the need for university education, or 2) the repetitive 'paper pushing' positions in many large organizations. Certainly, despite the survival and victory of capitalism, alienation appears to be on the increase and it reveals itself in the ubiquity of depression medication. Marx remains relevant in terms of pinpointing not only the economic but also the psychological reasons for modern depression.

### **The Marxist Critique of Market Economy**

Marx's critique of capitalism as an inefficient mode of production also remains highly significant. Many of those who were not Marxists, or even socialists, have adopted some of his ideas in their own analysis. English socialists like George Bernard Shaw, for example, agreed with Marx that capitalism was inefficient and even contradictory. Even as late as the 1940s, capitalist economists like John Maynard Keynes began to tinker with the supply and demand formula in order to band-aid capitalism from the Depression that Marx predicted and that could easily have led to social revolution. The fact that capitalism has survived as long as it has certainly does not make its hegemony inevitable. In fact, to view capitalist progress as inevitable is to fall into the same dogmatic approach of history that characterizes the Marxist system. The only major difference is that Marx was considerably smarter than most of the worshipers at the shrine of market economics.

Marx's primary argument was that, past a certain point, the market system was unnecessarily oppressive and fundamentally inefficient. His argument was ingenious and parts of it obviously remain just as valid today as 150 years ago. Capitalism can be tinkered with in various ways, but it has some serious failings that make it anything but a perfect system. In its relentless search for profits, and because of the increasingly fierce competition between capitalists, market society is increasingly characterized by the growth of a small number of monopolies. Capitalism does not of itself provide opportunities for those who aspire to join the middle class, as the development of national educational systems proves. The capitalist class itself is always in danger of being squeezed, even when new technologies would seem to provide new technologies. The extension of a global marketplace can even exacerbate these problems. I believe that Lou Dobbs on CNN is making the argument that this is precisely what is happening to the

American middle class – whatever that is -- today. Because of the fierceness of global competition and the need to keep fueling expansion by investment, as capitalism becomes international, it appears set on rolling back the wages of unionized workers and transferring a large sector into the low paying service industries. In any case, the bulk of the profits go to the capitalist class, become fewer and fewer as competition destroys the weakest among them and middle management is squeezed. With globalization, workers receive a proportionately smaller share of the fruits of their labour; they definitely work longer hours; they suffer from periodic unemployment; and they occasionally find themselves replaced by machines, or in some cases, as Marx suggests, by women and children. You only need to replace children with students and pensioners who don't have enough to live on and Marx's analysis doesn't seem so very antiquated.

Marx was fascinated by the optics of a system that amasses a huge amount of profits but that has no other instrument for ensuring capitalist investment a highly inefficient market. His description is brilliant. Capitalism is a *gigantic means for production and exchange* but *like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world*, it is not even able to ensure its own continuing profitability. The system continually and consistently runs into crises of overproduction – we are familiar with them as *recessions* – because it has no capacity for ensuring stable demand. Capitalism is so inefficient argued Marx, that it could be replaced by a form of *barbarism* in which capitalists as well as workers both will suffer – we call this a *Depression* and we had a very big one in the 1930s that arguably led to World War II. As a system, argued Marx, supply and demand is far from perfect. The most telling Marxist critique of capitalism is that it cannot even meet its own criteria for balanced growth. Businessmen are able to produce goods much better than they are able to distribute them. Crises of over production can cripple and conceivably topple the system at any time.

Today, we keep the system going by a number of innovations, the chief of which is the centralized control of the money supply. Equally important, organized labour was able to wrestle some concessions from the owners of capital that lead to a more efficient distribution of wealth. Birth control and the entry of women into the workforce have allowed the family as a unit to maintain economic stability. Marx couldn't have foreseen the ways that capital would adapt and, accordingly, he viewed extreme exploitation as a permanent feature of the system. If we wanted to be good little Marxists, we might suggest that some of these gains were temporary and seem to be being eroded in the new market economy. But I'm not interested in engaging in a defense of Marxism here, only a better appreciation for it. The key theme in *The Communist Manifesto* is that capital oppresses those who don't have it and that, once they realize the nature of the oppression, working people will begin to take back the power that is rightly theirs. Why is the economic power rightly theirs? Marx uses classical economic theory against itself. He invokes the labour theory of value, i.e. that value is assessed by the amount of labour that goes into producing something. He suggests that what the capitalist appropriates in the form of profits is really *surplus labour* or the product of labour above what is needed to reproduce labour. When described in this way, profits are a form of theft – a stealing of the products of labour from those who actually produce it. Against those who might argue that profits are the right of those who own the machinery or the capital in the first

place, Marx has an ingenious argument, i.e. that the same defense was used for centuries to defend landed property and an unjust feudal system.

The labour theory of value, including the concept of surplus value, are the weakest links in theoretical Marxism and the concepts that have proved most problematic for those who think Marx has an important point to make about exploitation and social fairness. To my way of thinking, getting involved in these disputes that constitute a kind of *marxology* is a bit of a waste of time because: 1) technology clearly eclipses labour as a source of value; 2) the theory of utility, as simplistic as it is when used by economists, at least provides a more flexible measure of value than labour; 3) value can be manufactured artificially by marketing; and most important 4) value is determined socio-culturally rather than simply economically, even in an overwhelmingly market society. Of course Marx would not accept the socio-cultural variable because he was concerned to be a scientist and to reduce all ideas and values to materially measurable terms. But, once you step outside this rigid framework, the concept of surplus value still has functionality in terms of showing how one group in society regularly, routinely and callously exploits another. Technology can also be viewed as another instrument that all too often victimizes rather than liberates the majority. And, of course, socio-cultural values further reflect the hegemony of the rich over the poor.

Amending the concept of surplus value to make it less rigid and overly scientific, we could conceivably talk about what the capitalist *deserves* versus what the capitalist actually gets. Capital largely renews itself. Many of those who have capital to invest, do not even manage their own assets but have others manage it for them. Others like Paris Hilton inherit wealth and can find something more or less useful to do if they wish. But there is no sense in saying that they deserve their wealth. Entrepreneurs are a more interesting model because they generate ideas and take risks, but entrepreneurs are not the ones who generally amass the most capital in modern society. Those CEOs who manage firms are occasionally pictured as deserving what they get because of their qualifications and the stress of their jobs. But I have serious problems with the suggestion that these individuals deserve what they are paid because 1) their remuneration has increased over 500% in past 2 decades in the Anglo-American environment of shareholder capitalism, and they increased most during the period when companies were not profitable; 2) much of the increase in the wages and perks of CEOs is not market driven, it stems from the power that they have over the appointment of individuals to the Boards of Governors that approve these pay raises.

### **Marx on Private Property and the Family**

Like many other nineteenth-century writers, Marx wanted to present himself, at least in his mature writings, as a scientist rather than as a propagandist. Like Darwin, Wagner and others, however, this self-professed master of reality had an uncanny knack for self-promotion. Despite all his protestations, he stands accused of deploying the same ideology and utopias that he saw in other people's writings. Of more lasting interest and certainly more controversial than his often tedious and tendentious theory of dialectical materialism – that you either believe or not – is Marx's analysis of the alienating effects

of private property. His vision of the communist society of the future is long on rhetoric and short on specifics. But one thing is clear. It does away with an institution that has a long and privileged intellectual lineage in the west – private property.

Let's be clear about one thing from the start. If you read *The Communist Manifesto* carefully, you'll find that Marx was not saying that no one should have possessions of any kind. What he said was that no one would be allowed to use capital or private property in ways that *subjugated* others or commissioned their labour. It was private property in the form of capital that Marx sought to eliminate.

Marx was not opposed to private property in principle; he was opposed to the *principle of private property*. Without private property, capitalism would never have emerged. Without the investment of capital, the most dynamic form of private property, economic backwardness would have prevailed. Unlike Rousseau, Marx had no objection to people putting fences around their property and distinguishing between what is *mine* and what is *yours*. He has no problem with capitalists using their private property to revolutionize the means of production and to usher in the first stages of modernity. His essential argument is that, whereas private property was a progressive institution in the past, it would be the biggest impediment to progress in the future. Never forget that the communist vision of the future was not only about *development* in the sense of the economy but also the individuality of everyone. It was when private property prevented the full development of these realms that it became a target.

Private property is not a *right* but an historical strategy. It made absolutely no sense to Marx to try to present private property as a universal, since it only surfaced in the seventeenth-century English Civil War, specifically in the writings of John Locke who was an apologist for English landowners against the king. Behind its ideological posturing, was a very specific historical program. Its *real* material purpose was to allow capitalists to profit from their investments. Capitalist profit implied not only the expropriation of resources but also the domination of all those without capital. Marx believed that all societies in the past were oppressive and that some oppression was necessary for economic development. But the private property of capitalists was unique in so far as it reduced all the relations between human beings to a *crude cash nexus*. To put it another way, capitalism is a system that allows those with private property to turn everyone else into a market commodity. Capitalism stripped the veil from all the garbage that had been spoken about the human community and revealed the economic oppression at its core. Moreover, it revealed the device at the heart of capitalist appropriation as private property. All the language surrounding this device was *ideological*.

Marx and Engel's glee in exposing private property as an historical fiction is palpable. Yes, they say, you capitalists accuse us of wanting to do away with private property, and you are absolutely right. In the world of the future there will be no need for private property as you capitalists conceive it. They are clear, however, that it is *capitalist private property* that they hope to abolish. When capitalists discuss property, Marx says, they typically want to create a false equation between individualism and property ownership. According to this formula, the only genuine individuals are those with

property; individuality is effectively denied for the vast majority of people who do not have private property. Communists want to do away with a private property that denies personal development to the majority.

A common but simplistic claim made against communism then and now is that all possessions will be held in common. Marx and Engels dismiss such an assertion in a single powerful sentence:

Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation.

Yet another claim that Marx and Engels dismiss is that a communist society will destroy incentive. If so, they suggest, capitalist society and the aristocratic society that preceded it should have died out altogether because so many people live on their capital without doing anything. Finally, they ridicule the idea that all culture will disappear in a communist society by pointing out that it is only bourgeois culture that will disappear, a lot of which is crap.

Marx and Engels don't waste their time on these arguments, but in what is a short pamphlet, they do devote a lot of time to the family. Why is this? There are two possible reasons. First, they might have suspected that an emotional attachment to the bourgeois nuclear family could make possible converts fear communism. Second, and far more important, they think that a discussion of the family is a perfect way of illuminating what is valuable and exciting in their methodology. In his attack on the bourgeois family, Marx made it clear that he was not attacking monogamous relationships or values of kinship. Instead he wanted to expose the *reality* of these idealized relationships within capitalism. And what he had to say is very revealing. First, he pointed out, capitalist society turned women and children into the 'possessions' of patriarchal husbands. Most bourgeois families were vehicles for accumulation, display and inheritance rather than genuinely affectionate relationships. Children were basically groomed in class values and educated in schools and universities where class relations could be solidified. Is this silly? Well, remember that the primary role of bourgeois wives in the nineteenth-century was not only to obey their husbands but also to display their husband's wealth. Even today, people with capital pay a premium to send their children to private schools and the best universities.

What happens to the working family in capitalism is something else again says Marx. Family values have little purchase where everyone has to concentrate on simply surviving. Now, it is obvious that life for the working class family did improve and that sentimental relationships evolved very differently from the description that Marx develops here. Remember, however, that he was writing in the 1840s when: 1) working class families were very poor, 2) children had to contribute to the family income from a very early age, 3) and prostitution was a common method of supplementing the family income. You could simply dismiss Marx as being wrong about a capitalism that actually improved the lives of everyone. But you might want to consider that this description is



not so inaccurate if you apply it to the situation of many working families in the global community, or even if you apply it to the ubiquitous ghettos in North American cities.

If you focus too much on the historical details, however, you could well miss what is really interesting about the analysis of the family in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx's fundamental and absolutely brilliant insight is that the family is not some static ideal but that its nature and function change with modernity. Consider how the relationship between men and women has changed as women won the right to enter the workforce. Consider how even the very concept of gender difference became problematic when love and relationships are no longer tied to the traditional family structure. Consider how the idea of adolescence changes with the introduction of birth control. Consider how parent child relationships are changing as we move to an information society where children know much more about the Internet than Dad and Mom. Marx and Engels are very modern because such cultural revolutions do not frighten them. They know that "all that seems solid" will "melt into the air".

### **The Trouble With Marx**

In this lecture, I've tried to do three things: 1) to show you how the Marxist system works, 2) to show you what insights, even into life today, you can gain from Marx's emphasis on *praxis*, and more unconventionally, 3) to show you that, whether you like or don't like the particulars of what he says, we've got a very modern thinker here. He's modern in so far as he clearly fits the *development* mold. He clearly recognizes the revolutionary dynamic of modern life; he embraces urbanization and technology; and his ultimate focus, far from an attempt to make people conform to a communist state, is to liberate consciousness from the dead weight of the past. His dogmatic scientism may seem a bit dated now, since we no longer have the faith in scientific truth that we used to have, but for its time it was very modern. It was the accepted technique for getting into and through reality.

Marx's scientific approach was underlined in his systematic dissection of less modern forms of consciousness as *ideological* and *utopian*. Not a few writers, however, have commented on the utopian nature of Marxist thought, leading inevitably to a communist society that frees everyone up from the dependence on material production and liberates their consciousness so that they explore themselves. The optimistic goal of Marxism is the liberated individual in a liberated society. Marx is, in many ways, an individualist. But why would we assume that individualism and social harmony would ever run in tandem. Could it not just as easily be the case that a correspondence between individual desire and *species life* would pose a serious problem for modern men and women? Moreover, isn't it just possible that the desire for belonging and the desire for development would result in serious contradictions that, unlike Marx's capitalist contradictions, cannot be so easily solved?

Marx never really tells us why he believes that the communist society of the future will be able to glue together all those *freely developing individuals*. Isn't modernity a problem with no straightforward solution or hope of a solution? In the pursuit of our

personal identities won't it become increasingly difficult to share and communicate our desires? Sharing property is not an insurmountable problem; it is our inability to share ourselves that characterizes modern men and women. The dilemma of the modern individual is the inability to find a meaningful emotional home. Marx's "critical insights" – his understanding that change is permanent and that identity is fleeting – tend to problematize and even contradict his "radical hope" for a stable home for the human spirit.

## The Modern Prometheus

### Introduction

Titles are important. They tell you a lot about a book. The full title of *Frankenstein* is *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*. So, if you want to know what the book is about, you'd better know what Prometheus represents. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is the Titan who either creates human beings or makes them self-sufficient by giving them the gift of fire. No longer playthings of the other Greek Gods in Olympus, human beings get their independence. The gods punish Prometheus by chaining him to a mountain and letting the harpies, flying women with beaks, eat out his liver. (That's why some people call aggressive women *harpies* today.) Prometheus doesn't get to die, however; every night his liver is regenerated so that it can be pecked at again. The gods were really pissed off with Prometheus.

So, you have to ask yourself what all of this has to do with the story that unfolds in Mary Shelley's novel. Answering that question isn't made any easier because other references, images and symbols litter the novel. There is, for example, the image of Satan, a term that Victor Frankenstein sometimes attaches to the monster. But the Satan in question isn't so much the Satan of the bible as the heroic and independent figure in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The main protagonist's name is 'Victor', which is title given to God in *Paradise Lost*. It can't have just been a coincidence that Mary Shelley decided to name Frankenstein 'Victor', since in some readings that she gave of the novel, she called the monster 'Adam'. It is no great leap to see Victor as playing at God in creating life in the form of Adam. In some legends of Prometheus, the Titan is depicted as creating human life out of clay, as Greek legend and Biblical stories merge. But what exactly is it that is being created here?

This is a horror story, although not terribly horrific by modern standards. But it is so much more than a horror story. It is an allegorical story using characters as literary symbols that explain something profound about human experience, in particular *modernity*. As the sub-title *modern Prometheus* suggests, the book is trying to say something about our modern experience. It doesn't take too much brainpower to see that this is a story about how nineteenth-century or modern human beings are acquiring and assimilating the powers formerly attributed only to the gods or to God. And it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to appreciate that Mary Shelley is warning us that these powers can be used for evil as well as good. The obvious but banal moral of the story is that we should be very careful about unleashing the powers of nature. At the very least we need to accept responsibility for our actions and not to leave it too late like Victor did.

One of the most common interpretations of *Frankenstein* is to view it as a warning about the consequences of scientific discovery. The scientific search for truth and its application to modern life is full of dangers. Scientists like Victor need to be reigned in by communal values rather than allowed to push the envelope of knowledge. Unfortunately, scientific discovery is a specialized *black box* that most people cannot

begin to understand and scientists, like Victor, are far too proud to explain themselves to we lesser beings. Unless either scientists themselves accept responsibility for the application of their researches, or the wider community demands accountability, the future of humanity may be threatened by cloning, designer drugs, environmental degradation, atomic warfare, or the appropriately named new concern over *Frankenfoods*. Mary Shelley certainly was one of the first to warn us about what happens when we leave the scientists to their own devices.

### **The Context: About the Writing of *Frankenstein***

I don't disagree at all with this emphasis. I do, however, think that there is a lot more interesting and far less obvious *stuff* worth exploring in this novel. Let's begin with the author and her circle herself. Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein* in 1816 in Lake Geneva where it was raining everyday because a recent volcanic disturbance much like St. Helens had disturbed the atmosphere. She was only 19 years old but already had been living with a romantic poet and womanizer Percy Blythe Shelley for two years. She met Percy at her father William Godwin's place. Godwin was a famous radical thinker who believed in things like social revolution and free love, except that he wasn't so happy when his 17-year-old daughter eloped to Paris and began giving her love freely to Percy. Mary deeply loved her father and they eventually reconciled. But she also revered the dead mother and role model that she never knew, Mary Wollstonecraft, another radical who composed the most important book on women in the eighteenth-century *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Over 200 years ago, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women were equal to men and should have the same education and rights as their male counterparts. This background was absolutely crucial because Mary always felt that she could and should write. She wrote under her own name, a thing that was unheard of in the early nineteenth-century. And she started publishing poetry when she was only 11.

She wrote other works besides *Frankenstein*, some of them very good, but none that had its energy and originality, and certainly nothing that captured the public imagination the way that *Frankenstein* did. The details of her writing the novel are significant. It wasn't just the "dark and stormy night" scenario by Lake Geneva that prompted the writing. The young romantic elite, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron were with her at the time, and the challenge they set one another was to write a ghost story. Mary was in anguish, not because she doubted her own abilities, but because this was a competition with males in which she could look very bad if she didn't come up with something very good. And she not only wanted to look good but to be original. That may be why she suppressed details about her sources that probably included passing near to castle Frankenstein where a "notorious alchemist" experimented with human bodies, as well as reading about Benjamin Franklin's experiments with electricity. At the end of the day, Mary Shelley need not have worried since she her imagination was equal to that of the males and a classic story emerged from their gathering.

Let's stay with this little circle on the banks of Lake Geneva for a moment longer, not only because it shows what women could do when encouraged by men who might have faults but who at least believed theoretically in the equality of women. They were all

fascinated and experimenting with ghost stories. In the eighteenth century, ghost stories were largely dismissed as superstitious fables designed to frighten children. The Enlightenment condemned them as breeding grounds for ignorance and fanaticism. But this radical romantic circle took ghost stories very seriously and, as a result, invented the modern horror story and, arguably, the entire genre of science fiction. Lord Byron's contribution was a sketch of a story about a vampire, that later got developed by a guy named Polidori in a book called *The Vampyre*. And you know what that led to – *I'd like to drink your blood tonight daywalker*. For her part, Mary Shelley invented the reanimated monster of body parts taken from a graveyard, who was later to be called *Frankenstein*. So, out of this little circle emerge the two creatures who have dominated the nightmares of Western civilization and scared women into men's laps ever since. Largely out of this little circle of friends and lovers comes our fascination with the Gothic and the thrill we get from horror.

Today, many of us like to be scared by these stories, and we may even find *Frankenstein* a bit on the tame side. But contemporaries certainly didn't. Mary Shelley tells us how she felt horror at her own daydream of the monster twitching to life with a pale emaciated scientist standing over it. And she immediately understood that she could communicate this feeling to others. It sounds like a lot of fuss over a *ghost story* doesn't it? Unless we are devotees, we wouldn't place anywhere near the same emphasis on a Stephen King novel, would we? And Stephen King is certainly much better than Mary Shelley at terrifying us. The Romantics were interested in ghost stories not because they wanted to sell horror product but because they had an agenda. They felt that the human imagination was being stifled by the modern emphasis on empirical facts and rationality and they wanted to open its creative potential. Fear dissolves the hold of the rational world on the human imagination. Horror for horror's sake, in the manner of Stephen King, would have been a childish exercise to these writers. Horror that makes you consider human life from a new and different perspective is what Mary Shelley and the Romantics were all about.

The purpose of horror, of the shudder, is to break people out of their everyday headspace. The everyday headspace, the common identity, the *rut* that most of us are in, our mundane, mechanical and customary existence. The everyday headspace is the antithesis of the imaginary approach to life. What better way to alert people to alternate perspectives than to scare them? And what better way to scare them than with a story about death and ghosts? By combining the ghost story with a romantic/medieval past that couldn't be more different from the materialistic present, the late romantics invented the *Gothic*. Without them, there would be no horror movies, no Marilyn Manson, no Dead Can Dance, no My Chemical Romance, and certainly no Stephen King. A major and defining difference between horror and gothic today and in Mary Shelley's time is that the latter was a critical approach to the capitalist present whereas the former largely has been co-opted within entertainment, consumerism or adolescent rebellion posing as a lifestyle (death style?) choice.

Mary Shelley wasn't anything like the author of *Harry Potter* either. Her writing had a much more serious intent. And her life, like most of the romantics, was anything but a

direct route to fame and fortune in a capitalist consumerist utopia. What happened to Mary Shelley after Lake Geneva? She had several children, all of which died prematurely as was so common at that time, except the last one called Percy Florence Shelley. In 1822, her husband died tragically and she and her son went to live with her husband's father Sir Timothy Shelley because you couldn't survive as a single parent in those days and certainly not on the funds that came from writing. Sir Timothy was the opposite of his son, a patriarchal conservative bully, who made Mary's life difficult; but she was willing to sacrifice everything for her son. She published various pieces, all in all a respectable literary career, but while it brought her a little fame, there was no fortune attached; the most interesting writing piece was a story of incest that her domineering father in law suppressed, but which was published posthumously. None of her other writings captured the public interest like *Frankenstein*.

Her literary legacy is usually located within the romantic/radical orbit, especially because of the romantic elements in *Frankenstein* and her own seemingly radical choices with respect to love and life. Her attitudes are often assumed to mirror those of her husband, especially since she spent a great deal of her later life ensuring that Percy Blythe Shelley's writings would be completely published. The somewhat careful and conservative attitudes that she demonstrated in later life are usually attributed to the fact that she could not afford to alienate the older Percy's father and the younger Percy's grandfather. But I beg to differ. It is a mistake to assume that because a woman loves men in the form of husband and child, and because she devotes her life to them, that she automatically thinks like them. There are elements in *Frankenstein: The New Prometheus* that suggest otherwise. I'm going to argue that not only may Mary Shelley have had a very different and much more conservative political orientation from her husband but also that her literary approach illuminates some of the negative tendencies associated with romantic individualism. Nor should any of this be so surprising, since Mary Shelley's experience was different from mother's and she knew just how hard life with romantic males could be.

None of this is meant to suggest that Mary Shelley was not progressive in many of her attitudes nor that the imaginative and gothic elements in her writing owed a lot to romanticism. But Mary's personal experience is reflected in her writing as well. Cocooned within a gothic tale that sounds very masculine, in which any female characters are silent and shadowy figures to say the least, is a touching appeal for the kind of caring domesticity and stable family life that always escaped Mary herself. It is delivered subtly and, ironically, largely through the mouth of a Monster. What the Monster needs is love and relationships, and what the heroic protagonists Walton and Victor clearly underestimate, is that affection, not knowledge, is the glue that holds the future of humanity together. In many ways, this is a *chick* novel disguised as a horror novel.

## **The Two Revolutions**

Before we explore Dwyer's interpretation, it is only fair that we sketch out the customary historical context in which *Frankenstein* is situated. It was composed in 1818 just when

the effects of two major revolutions were being internalized and assessed by serious people. The first, and typically considered the most important of these revolutions was the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution is typically dated as beginning in the 1770s. After roughly 100 years of urbanization in England, an immensely important transformation took place in the textile industry. People in pre-industrial society grow their own food and make most of their own clothes and furniture. Around 1660, enclosures on the land, tenant farming, and the four field crop rotation system, revolutionized agricultural production. The increase in the food supply led to an increase in population. While mortality was still high among children and women in childbirth (Mary's life history shows you that) it wasn't like in the past. The English population grew and many of them were forced to go to the cities to find work. The number of employable people who needed to be fed and clothed increased exponentially. Instead of 'letting out' wool to crofters with spinning wheels in the countryside, the cheap abundance of cotton encouraged some enterprising people to build factories in order to make the kind of cotton clothing that most of you wear today. The cotton mills were the first examples of mechanized production. They produced enormous profits in the range of 20%. They typically ran double shifts through the night, earning the label *satanic mills* from those who believed that life was changing for the worst. They created two unprecedented classes – the industrial capitalist class and the working class. More than that, they entirely changed the nature of labour and life, by specializing and routinizing work.

The first generation of English Romantics, for example William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, objected to the spread of the mechanistic and calculating principle in modern life. They opposed a combination of a traditional and an idealized countryside to the impersonal city. They offered attention to and absorption in nature as a way of combating the new mentality of specialization and reinvigorating the holistic perspective that they felt was being lost. But you already know all of that from the previous lecture. What distinguishes late from early romanticism is the increased emphasis on passion over reason, on uninhibited passion over sentimentality, and personal freedom and self-cultivation over social involvement. As the mechanization of society increased, romanticism became ever more defensive and began its long retreat into the inner resources of the artistic imagination. What makes *Frankenstein* so interesting and original is that it does not waste time on the mechanistic and one-dimensional nature of modern industrial life, but goes straight after the dynamic that will ensure its future – the scientific search for truth. Mary Shelley clearly argues that knowledge is dangerous, that truth outside of morality will prove horrific, and that the potential of science to negate human values absolutely must be addressed before it is too late.

Mary Shelley's work was prescient to say the least. In 1818, the Industrial Revolution still wasn't really *industrial* in the way that you would think of it. The factories were small; they were largely confined to textiles and pottery. James Watt had invented the steam engine, but it was still mostly a toy or used by miners to pump water out of coalmines. In other words, the *steam revolution* was just getting under way; the Second Industrial Revolution when the great marriage of science and capital would really begin working together with iron and steel to change our Western World wouldn't really start

until the 1830s. Experiments with electricity were just beginning and would not come to fruition until the 1850s. In fact, if Mary Shelley really is envisioning modern science transforming the world, she is projecting ahead and providing a warning to future generations.

We don't need to attribute such clairvoyance to Mary Shelley, because there was another revolution that she was already experiencing, that was an intense topic of discussion in the circles that hung around her father, and that she was responding to, namely the French Revolution. The early romantics tended to embrace the French Revolution that took place in 1789 because its values of personal emancipation and social development free of all artificiality. The key word that comes out of the French Revolution is *autonomy* for all of us as free individuals. But by the early 1790s, the French Revolution had turned into the Terror of the Jacobins and not only aristocrats but also moderate reformers were being executed. The romantics were confronted with the fact that the ideals of human emancipation did not conform to the experience of revolution. In late romanticism, the emphasis turned even more forcefully against Enlightenment science and rationalism that was thought to lead to the destruction of human relations. Some romantics even began to side with Edmund Burke whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was one of the earliest condemnations of the French Revolution's attack on traditional values.

Percy Blythe Shelley, the husband of Mary, and William Godwin, her father, went against the late romantic current and remained defenders of the French Revolution throughout their lives. In *Frankenstein*, however, we see that the woman who loved them has already begun to seriously question any search for truth or devotion to abstractions that could lead to social disintegration. In an account of the radical politics of her father (and by implication her husband), Mary Shelly commented that initially the revolutionary flame burned brightly and aroused minds to their full capacity, but it soon became "dimmed" and "deformed" resulting in communal death. Mary's perspective clearly was closer to Burke than either her father or her lover. But this difference was softened and masked behind an entertaining ghost story. If, as I expect, Mary Shelley's point of view was forged by the discussions around the French Revolution, more than the Industrial Revolution, it is the search for knowledge in general and not its industrial application that concerns her. Of course, we today are doubly threatened to the extent that science is embodied in technologies that allow for considerably greater control and manipulation of nature and human nature than could have been conceived in 1818. This being the case, the story has at least as much relevance today as it did in the nineteenth century.

### **Just Who is the Monster Anyway?**

We will get a much better idea of what Mary Shelley wanted to say, however, by focusing on the novel's content than its context. In fact a different context and a gendered perspective emerges from a close reading. Everything depends on what you make of the Monster.

So many interpreters have viewed the monster with no name as the alter ego of Victor Frankenstein that it is really not so surprising that the monster eventually came to be



known as *Frankenstein* in popular culture. One ingenious contemporary interpretation is that Victor himself committed the murders and suppressed that truth as a symbolic monster in his unconscious. According to this view, the monster is a symbol of Victor's own "moral degradation". Another, more plausible, explanation is that, since Victor created the Monster, it reflects other parts – namely the dark side -- of his personality. Such an explanation can be extended to a psychological investigation into the poles of human behaviour. Civilized manners covering savage tendencies and all that. Do I need to tell you that these kinds of interpretations are informed by psychology, especially the Freudian variety? Such interpretations can be enlightening. The primary problem with such interpretations, however, is that they ignore the fact that the Monster comes out looking pretty good as the story develops. In fact, what makes *Frankenstein* partly defective as a tale of horror, and much more interesting as a modern fable, is that it is altogether too easy to identify with Monster. The Monster is more human than his creator.

The Monster has every disadvantage you can think of. He's eight feet tall, with yellow dead flesh skin and rheumy eyes. He's constantly labeled monster, demon, fiend, and wretch by his creator. He commits several gruesome murders. Sometimes he sneers or laughs and because he basically has no upper lip, it's demonic to say the least. Victor, on the other hand, is very handsome, highly intelligent and has polished manners. He's adored by his family, deeply loved by his girlfriend and boyfriend, and admired as the pinnacle of civilized man by the other narrator, Walton, who wants to be just like Victor if he could. Victor is also the most prestigious modern professional that you can imagine -- the dedicated scientist who wants to change the world for the better by, among other things, showing us the way to eternal life. He appears to be the epitome of a selfless hero, giving his life and almost driving himself to death, in the service of universal humanity. And did I mention that Victor is charismatic? Walton and others are drawn to him like a magnet. He's a total success story; someone who can have anything he wants. And he wants a lot; he wants to play God.

The Monster would seem to be at a decided disadvantage. Yet, upon closer inspection, doesn't the Monster appear to be more human and humane than Victor is? All he wants is to love and be loved. Even the revenge that he is driven to can be explained by his ill treatment, particularly the indifference of his creator. Victor, on the other hand, is pretty self-centered. He's not self-centered in the mundane bourgeois way of seeking material wealth. He's driven by the desire to discover truth and to serve humanity. Those qualities are admirable, but they do not make Victor a good friend or a good mate. Victor's ego is huge. Victor's focus on himself gets his best friend and his wife killed. Even when Victor finally accepts full responsibility for the creation that he seeks to destroy, he remains totally driven by his own abstractions. It isn't impossible to admire him, but it is difficult to like him. Like Prometheus, he doesn't deserve our pity.

Literary theorists are fond of looking clever by turning conventional wisdom upside down. As I mentioned earlier, some who have noticed the contrast between Victor and the Monster have suggested that Victor is the real monster. In fact, Victor does call the Monster "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave". Since Victor is the

*modern Prometheus*, that interpretation translates into modern scientists being monsters who create monstrosities like the atomic bomb. But such an interpretation is difficult to sustain. After all 'Victor' was the pen name of Percy Blythe Shelley, Mary's husband, and she clearly didn't think of him as a monster. Victor isn't so much a monster as he is a self-absorbed and obsessive character with misplaced priorities. Victor like Walton is full of ambition to do something good and important with his life. The point is that they lose touch with a deeper and more important reality.

Victor isn't a monster. Scientists may be scary but they are not monsters either. What is *monstrous* is the tendency of modernity to steamroll over any and all values that are *human and humane* in the name of political, economic, or scientific progress. Modern development loses sight of the higher reality of feeling. The most real human being in the story is the Monster and he embodies the potential of humankind for both good and evil. That he turns out to be a Monster is what is monstrous. Is it too much to say that he is the child of modernity, the next generation with almost superhuman powers for good or evil? Let's not go so far, but only point out that he, rather than Victor or Walton, provides us with an alternative direction for humanity than heroic individualism. That direction is heavily gendered in some unexpected ways.

### **The Ethics of Care**

Biography can't tell you everything about what an author is trying to say, but it can provide you with some valuable hints about why they do say what they say. Mary Shelley lost her mother at 10 days old. She was educated by the housekeeper, neglected by her father, and victimized by her stepmother. She entered into an unmarried relationship with a poet, not the best of choices, who didn't so much cheat on her as practice free love without consideration of who he was hurting. She lost most of her children young and ended up dependent on the charity of a bully who didn't care about her, but only about his lineage through her son. What she wanted more than anything else was a stable family and a committed relationship.

This was a highly personal experience of course, but one whose combinations will be understood by many women. Mary's mother was totally modern in arguing for the full emancipation of women, but Mary was much more typical of the women of her age and today in that her primary interest lay in private and close relationships. Whether or not it comes from biology or historical position, women and men tend to have a different ethical approach to human relationships. This can be put quite simply. Men pride themselves on being independent, detached and active problem solvers whereas women play more nurturing and caring roles and care much more about finessing relationships. That doesn't mean that women can't be rational or that men can't be sensitive. What it does mean, however, is that the characteristic *approach* to issues is different. According to the feminist scholar Carol Gilligan, this difference evidences itself in a very different ethical agenda. When men tend to think in universals like humanity and abstractions like justice, women tend to focus on the particular relationships to which they belong and demonstrate more *caring*. Gilligan suggests that a patriarchal male-dominated world

tends to downplay and devalue the ethical qualities that women display, while at the same time benefiting greatly from the assumption that women will or should continue to nurture them.

All of this may sound a bit abstract, but I'll flesh it out with reference to *Frankenstein* in a moment. First I want to make the point that the Romantic Movement theoretically combined both male and female perspectives in its emphasis on passion, closeness to nature, love, benevolence and humanity. Romanticism brought women into the center of the picture in two ways: 1) women and children were thought to be closer to nature and 2) love between two freely consenting *individuals* was probably the single most important dynamic in the romantic arsenal. But romanticism, like any cultural program, was susceptible of being hijacked by males to the extent that it got caught up in male-centered abstractions like heroic and alienated individualism, free love and beautiful truths divorced from human experience. It is not impossible, but it is certainly difficult and restricting to envision women as heroes, alienated from society, loving only in the moment, or following truth even when it negates the social. It's not impossible but what it means is that women's only choice is to play a game where men design all the basic rules. As romanticism evolved, women faced the unenviable choice of being caricatured as the virgins or prostitutes; male abstractions like the *feminine mystique* came to dominate.

*Frankenstein* offers a subtle critique of heroic individualism and provides a powerful gendered alternative. Ironically, this alternative is stated by Victor near the beginning of the book and his choice to ignore his own insight is precisely what leads to his downfall. Victor argues that being *perfectly human* means "preserving a calm and peaceful mind" (57) and contends that this "rule" must extend to "the pursuit of knowledge" because, if man did not allow this pursuit to interfere with the "tranquility of domestic relations":

Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country: America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.

This then is the key and the reason why Victor has only himself to blame for his undoing. He understands perfectly that small-scale domestic relations are the key to happiness and humanity, but the search for truth lures him away. He not only wears himself out but also separates himself from rest of humanity. He deprives himself of "rest" and "health". He substitutes abstractions, for which the most fitting symbol is CORPSES, for flesh and blood relationships. A corpse is a body hollowed out of everything that makes it human. It is no longer a subjective being as a subject for the anatomist. As his first nightmare suggests, this search for truth in corpses transforms his Mother and his beloved Elizabeth into CORPSES. Others, like his friend Clerval, attempt to shake him out of his self-indulgent obsessions. But even Clerval is doomed to be a corpse figuratively as well as literally, because Victor does not treat him like he should a friend. He does not treat others like living human beings. He loses his affection for nature –he can no longer enjoy the spring – and for human nature.

Mary must have often felt like a hollowed out corpse, being dumped overboard like the putative *bride of Frankenstein*, many times in her life with Percy Blythe Shelley. You can hear her voice in Elizabeth's letters to Victor, especially when she emphasizes the "immutable laws" that connect "placid homes" with "contented hearts" (69). Elizabeth is busy, making everyone happy around her, including Justine, who Victor's actions will condemn to execution. Justine is a significant symbol of what romanticism should achieve – the recognition of the fundamental equality of everyone, the development of simple and honest manners, and the spread of good treatment and affection from those with resources to those who are less disadvantaged. Justine is also a symbol of how human nature can blossom when it is treated with kindness. Elizabeth also dotes on young William, Victor's brother, who is the epitome of romantic hopes in human nature because of his combination of innocence and his joyful embrace of life. The letter from Victor's father informing his son of William's murder further reveals the moral fruits of a close knit family. "Enter the house of mourning, my friend," he says, "but with kindness and affection for those who love you, and not with hatred of your enemies." That's the world of domestic relations and that's the domestic bliss that contrasts so sharply with Victor's laboratory, Victor's conceit in his own powers, and Victor's disgust for his creation. That's also the stable kind of loving family that Mary Shelley would have liked for herself and for her own children.

### **All You Need is Love!**

Book Two of *Frankenstein* has less literary in-your-face power for us moderns than Book One. It moves very slowly as the experience of the Monster is catalogued and it dissolves the horror of the first book in a much more ambiguous sentimentality. But it is in some ways much richer symbolically and its ambiguity makes it much more modern in tone and treatment. It certainly reflects a modern world in which the distinction between good and evil is blurred. The world of Book Two we learn that the world is neither black nor white; it is very, very gray in a way that women understand best.

The monster is born, and bereft of his creator, must make his own meaning in the world. In a godless universe, the Monster's first consciousness is hunger and then fear. Fear turns to wonder and amazement as the Monster sees the variety and beauty of nature. The language and feel of this section has Jean Jacques Rousseau written all over it; the Monster is a combination of Emile and the noble savage. By this I mean that the Monster is neither good nor bad, but has our compassion because like all of us, he is vulnerable. The Monster's personality is undeveloped; the nature of its development will depend on its encounter with society; the natural tendency however is absolutely clear. The moment the Monster feels an emotional connection with the De Lacy, his moral personality begins to evolve. He now begins to appreciate what "happiness" and "unhappiness" is, certainly not material wealth but in sympathetic connections:

When they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys. I saw few human beings besides them; and if any other happened to enter the cottage, their harsh manners and rude gait only enhanced to me the superior accomplishments of my friends.

Before he even has significant contact, the Monster views his secret domestic circle as “friends” and he wants more than anything to belong. It is important to understand what Mary Shelly wants to imply. All civilization, all manners, all ethics depends upon this initial small-scale domestic circle. The Monster initiates his own education, begins to pursue knowledge, NOT FOR MASTERY OF NATURE OR OTHERS, but because he wants to share in their thoughts and to communicate with them. This is the “godlike science” that the Monster wishes to master (133). The *mastery of language* is not so much an instrumental as a sentimental impulse. It is the hope of connection and exploration of emotions/motivations that drives the Monster. Mary Shelley constantly underlines the sympathetic connection by having her cottagers alternate music with conversation that conveys emotion. This focus on sympathetic caring contrasts sharply with abstracted search for the secrets of science or the domination of the globe.

What Mary Shelley invariably wants us to focus on is the ‘human’ relationship, which gets more highly charged as we are introduced to Felix and Sasie (Safie) who clearly are in love. As we shall see, love between a man and a woman and domestic bliss ultimately is the *only* thing that compensates for a pretty screwed up social world and the *only* foundation for a better world. In order to underscore this point, we watch with fascination as the Monster tries to make sense of the larger society in which the De Lacy family is situated. This larger society often appears to be the antithesis of the loving family. European society values people according to birth and wealth – “high and unsullied descent united with riches”. Aided and abetted by Christianity, it had given rise to a neo-colonial empire that dripped with blood. Sasie and the Monster both weep when they discover what happened to the Natives whose land America once was. They simultaneously deplore the rise and fall of aggressive empires. At a level closer to home, the Monster discovers that the nuclear family is not exempt from calamities associated with an artificial society; the De Lacy family was bankrupted by an equally materialistic Turkish merchant and French treasury. But at least they had each other. The Monster had nobody.

Shelly stereotypes Turks as perfidious and makes a gratuitous connection between Arabs and greed that we can all deplore. Playing on that stereotype allows her to strike out at the selfish and commercial spirit of the age, but that doesn’t make it any the more palatable. She also makes disparaging remarks about Islam and women that could be construed as colonial attitudes, especially since Sasie prefers Western Christian civilization because it has a more elevated view of the intellect and independence of women. But the ‘women question’ is clearly at play here rather than an East-West contrast, and Shelley’s criticisms of western civilization and her dislike for exploration leading to domination are obvious. What is more, the book can be read as a plea injecting a female point of view into a European civilization whose dominating tendencies she believes are hurtling it towards catastrophe. We shouldn’t forget that this is a book about Europe, written by a European, which condemns any development that forfeits the human in the interest of some abstract humanity.

The history of Europe that evidences such a desire for power genuinely pains our increasingly domesticated Monster. Although he sometimes wants to “shake off” this painful knowledge, his trust in his own benevolence makes him on balance an optimist. He desires to “become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed.” His moral sentiments are further fortified by reading, what else, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who he views as a kind of divine model of truthful feeling. But the worm in this Edenic apple is obvious. The Monster has a heart built for caring but no one cares for him. All you need is love. But if you don’t get love, what you will become is a Monster. Instead of morphing into a kind of Werther, you become Satan. The identification of the Monster with Satan is a fascinating one in the novel and can be interpreted on a number of levels. Psychologically, however, Shelley’s argument should be pretty clear, punctuated as it is by the reference to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and De Lacy’s comments to the Monster who he cannot see. With love, a human paradise is possible, without love the abiding residue is self-interest and envy. The Monster could have been rejected and victimized by the larger society and still have retained his moral sentiments. His identity was highly precarious, however, and his rejection by his own designated family was disastrous. His only desire now was rage and revenge.

Seen from his own interior point of view, the creature no longer inspires ‘horror’ but sympathy. When he meets with Victor, Victor’s fear soon changes to pity. The discussion is more than evenly matched because the Monster is highly articulate, especially about the reasons for his plight. The Monster is still human and still redeemable by love, in this case the love of a female like himself who is to be created by Frankenstein. The Doctor himself admits that his Monster was a creature of “fine sensations” and that it was he the creator who had demonstrated a lack of feeling. Frankenstein makes the bride, but in fear that the Monster might breed, dismembers the form and dumps it’s dismembered pieces in a Scottish loch.

There’s lots of stuff going on in Book Three, especially some playing with the travel genre and romantic scenery so important to the Romantics. But two images are most bizarre and compelling. The first is the dumping of female body parts in the loch. Remember that the dumper is Victor, the pen name for Percy Blythe Shelley, who is dumping the body parts of a potential bride for the Monster, who is a kind of alter ego for Percy himself. If I were Percy, I’d suspect that Mary was trying to tell me something about what I was doing to her and what an opportunity for love he was throwing away. The second image is the Monster leaving the deathbed of Frankenstein, not to hide away somewhere but to commit suicide like Werther. Like Werther perhaps in that he cannot have his love in life, but unlike Werther too in that he is going out in a blaze of romantic glory on top of a funeral pyre. He’s not going quietly. He says that he will “ascend my funeral pyre triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames”. The sentimental Monster will no longer be tormented by his feelings.

### ***What am I?***

Mary Shelley would not be such a great and enduring novelist if her only message were “all you need is love!” It is certainly true that things would have worked out differently

for the Monster if he had been nurtured by the De Lacy family and he might have still been redeemed by a female companion. It is undoubtedly important to highlight the female emphasis on nurturing relationships that challenged by the Western emphasis on dominating nature rather than cultivating human nature. It is even more important to show how Shelley's strategy put a gender issue firmly at the heart of a romantic classic.

But gender isn't everything and there is a sense of what it means to be human that couldn't be forced Procustes style into gendered terms even in the very patriarchal nineteenth century. And even the concept of 'caring' or 'love' does not completely capture the brilliance of this novel. In order to 'get at' a deeper meaning, we need to ask a question that you should always consider when reading a novel. What is missing from this novel? What does the author not talk about? When you ask this question, you are paradoxically looking for something that is missing but ever omnipresent by its very absence. In other words, you are looking for something that provides a key to meaning.

In this case, I would argue that what is most obviously missing is God. This is 1818. We are on the cusp of the Victorian Period. Almost everyone goes to Church; religion is everywhere. But God is not in this book. You would think that a book that criticizes a man "paying God", aping the role of the Creator, would have a religious sub-text. But you would be hard pressed to find it. What makes the book very modern is that human beings are alone in the universe, and solely responsible for what they do. To the extent that one of the book's messages is "all you need is love", love of God does not enter into it. God may be missing, but the feeling of abandonment in the universe clearly is not.

When the Monster dies, he says that his "spirit will rest in peace", but there's no religion in this because he adds, "if it thinks, it will not think thus". There is no heavenly Paradise; the paradise that he is denied is that of human warmth. Victor is an atheist as well. We know that Victor personifies Percy Shelley in many ways because the poem that he recites is Shelley's:

We rest: a dream has power to poison sleep.  
 We rise: one wand'ring thought pollutes the day.  
 We feel, conceive, or reason; laugh or weep.  
 Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away;  
 It is the same: for, be it joy or sorrow,  
 The path of departure still is free.  
 Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;  
 Nought may endure but mutability!

All is change or mutability; there are no standards that one can depend upon. Religion has left the building. The one person who is religious – who still has faith --in this novel is Justine. Ironically, it is her faith that cements her death. She confesses to the murder of William so that she can get absolution from the Priest. But she's a traditional village girl, and not a protagonist of the novel. She's liked but patronized as simple and naïve.

The reason that I want to emphasize this absence of religious faith is not only to show that the book is modern but also to point to a modern predicament – the feeling of abandonment in the Universe. Science and Humanity have usurped God. Victor drives himself to make scientific discoveries that will help humanity in the abstract. But, if this is so, then he must accept full responsibility – the responsibility that could formerly be shared with God – for his actions. Modern man, even if he still claims to be religious, bears this burden much, much more than traditional man. But we cannot all be Victors. We may not bear the same responsibility for our actions as those who occupy leadership positions. Victor Frankenstein is not Everyman. That's why we don't identify with him.

But we can all identify with the Everyman in the novel – The Monster. I don't mean to suggest that we all have a similar emotional history as the Monster, even though the development of curiosity, affection, love and resentment are pretty universal. In a deeper sense, the question of the way we resemble the monster is much more universal than that once religion ceases to be a central signification in our lives. The monster, as he learns his lessons beside the cottage, asks, "What was I?" The question could only be answered in "groans". Who am I; what am I; why am I here; why do I exist? He describes himself as a "restless spectre" that can only escape these questions with "death". Cast out of the one thing that he views as paradise, he is a being in search of meaning and a wanderer in search of a home. His wandering however has no home. And, ultimately, no matter how close he hopes to get to other human beings, he is alone; he dies alone. Notice the description of his wandering:

But how was I to direct myself? I knew that I must travel in a south-westerly direction to reach my destination: but the sun was my only guide. I did not know the names of the towns that I was to pass through, nor could I ask information from a single human being; but I did not despair...Nature decayed around me, and the sun became heatless; rain and snow poured around me; mighty rivers were frozen; the surface of the earth was hard and chill, and bare, and I found no shelter.

This reads so much like a metaphor for modern humanity that it is difficult to believe that Mary Shelley was only giving a geographical description of the wanderings of a Monster. It is even more difficult not to see this deeper meaning if we consider that Victor too, when he is not stuck in his laboratory, is described by Mary Shelley as a wanderer whose "cup of life was poisoned for ever" who, just like his Monster, was subject to "deep groans, and whose melancholy longing was "a devouring *maladie du pays*" which is French for homesickness, especially for one's homeland.

Another metaphor for modern man is the "traveler" or what we today would call the tourist. Mary Shelley and her husband were experienced travelers and Book Three of *Frankenstein* contains lots of evidence of their wanderings, not only geographically but also into various pasts. After describing some of the travels that were really those of Mary and Percy, it is fascinating to listen to Victor's description:



A traveler's life is one that includes much pain amidst its enjoyments. His feelings are forever on the stretch, and when he begins to sink into repose, he finds himself obliged to quit that on which he rests in pleasure for something new, which again engages his attention, and which also he forsakes for other novelties.

The wanderer with homesickness but no home is a metaphor for the modern human condition. Bob Dylan uses it in the famous words "no direction home". Without God, we are all 'rolling stones'. *Frankenstein* is a novel about and for people who've been abandoned. Its context is the early nineteenth-century when change meant that most traditional values were gone, change or mutability was the only permanency, and the exploration of *who or what am I* had begun in earnest. A strong suspicion is that the question can never be answered and that the only resolution to the question is a highly unsatisfactory one. As Victor puts it: "And now my wanderings began, which are to cease but with life." Death is the only horizon and the ultimate meaning of life. It is the *shadowplay* referred to in the music of the best rock band that ever existed -- Joy Division. Life is a "shadowplay" acting out one's "own death" and "no [thing] more."

Heaven and hell exist in *Frankenstein* and in late romantic literature generally. Only now they are psychological. Spirits, shades, nightmares and bad memories can create a living hell. Victor says that he carries about "eternal hell" with him. The increasingly brief and flitting glimpses of Paradise are associated with childhood, nature, optimism and, of course, nostalgia for home. Death, therefore, may be welcomed as the termination of hell as it was in the case of the Monster and Victor who asks: "Why did I not die? More miserable than man ever was before, why did I not sink into forgetfulness and rest?" Life is a "life sentence" for a doomed person. It is also the termination of heaven and, as such, it is to be greatly feared. Ironically, the fear of and "dark melancholy" on death, and powerful feelings generally, can make us feel alive and temporarily counteract the kind of "bitterness" that Victor describes as stemming from painful "memories of the past" and dark "anticipations of the future".

The modern mood that the early romantics could not have anticipated but that the later romantics confronted was *ennui*. This French word, sometimes translated as boredom but conveying a very modern kind of lethargy and depression is well worth exploring. You would think that the romantics, with their emphasis on powerful emotions like terror, sublimity and love, would be immunized against this kind of depression. But a wanderer requires constant stimulation, when a large part of that stimulation is internal, when meaning is memory, when many memories are painful and others fleeting, the net result can be psychological exhaustion. We'll be talking a lot more about these aspects of modernity in future lectures.

### **I Want to Be Somebody**

Another way to see the Monster is as a metaphor for modern culture, as something pieced together from old body parts, a kind of monstrosity of superannuated ideas and dead ideals without vitality or coherent meaning. It is difficult to sail a safe course towards individuality when the harbour is so full of reefs. Most of you have probably felt a bit

like the Monster at one time or another. Like him, you look in the mirror and you think that you are ugly. How will other people accept you? Or you look at what a mess your parents or the older generation has made, and you wonder how on earth you can fit in. Sometimes you do find a way to fit in, but then you might realize that it is not really you and you need to wander again. Like the Monster, you may hope that the love of one person like yourself will provide all the answers. But don't forget what Victor says, everything changes and everyone is ultimately alone.

The adolescent male point of view is to dominate – to want all or nothing. To get on top or go down with guns a blazing. You see it in Walton. Walton's not a scientist but an explorer (that's how you know that this isn't a book simply about science but about an attitude). He's obsessed to find a Northwest Passage through and around the Pole. He talks just like a guy when it looks like his fellow sailors are going to mutiny. "Oh! Be men, or be more than men. Be steady to your purposes, and firm as a rock. This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you...". What a pile of male bullshit! That's the kind of testosterone that fueled Victor and, let's not forget, Percy Blythe Shelley and his pal Lord Byron, who died trying to be a hero by swimming the Hellespont.

Let's also not forget that this is also the kind of attitude that made Europe a power in the world. Today, an awful lot of people are wondering whether that power has been utilized more for evil than for good. That's why today it is particularly useful to consider Mary Shelley's very different point of view. As a very intelligent woman married to an alpha male, Mary Shelley could clearly see the temptations and despair associated with modernity. *Frankenstein* has a very clear moral message. The moral is for alpha males to back off, avoid rushing headlong into things, and consider the human impact of what they are doing. Meaningfulness and tranquility doesn't come from great achievements, whose results might well be ambivalent; they come from being at peace with yourself. Women have learned this better than men. They know that the most important social contributions don't need to be flashy and demonstrative; they know that being a good listener is just as important as being high profile. The women of *Frankenstein* have nurturing, caring, balancing personalities. They don't have the same desperate need to act, to move, to discover, to change, and to dominate. It is this obsession with movement and change that leads modern men so far astray, so far away from themselves.

Victor Frankenstein gives the secret to Walton as he dies. He says "Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries". Balance over action. So hard for men, not at difficult for women Mary Shelley would suggest. What is obviously more difficult, and that Mary Shelley could not talk about in a male dominated society is the hardship that comes from always being in the male shadow. But she must have felt it because it was the story of her life. There are a tantalizing couple of sentences in *Frankenstein* that provide a glimpse not only into her situation but also her independence of character. After she'd written a few pages, her husband Percy "urged her to develop the idea at greater length". If it "wasn't for his incitement" the novel would "never have

taken the form in which it was presented to the world.” This was balanced, giving credit where credit is due. But she informed her readers that she was *somebody* too:

I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband.

In closing, it is worth mentioning a point that so often gets overlooked. At a time when most serious women writers used a male pen name, Mary Shelley was one of the few who brave enough to write under her own name. She wanted to be recognized for who *she* was. And she clearly was a woman with something important to say to men.

### **Where is Marx's Working Class?**

So, in conclusion, this is a book about three things: the status of knowledge in the modern world, the human condition in a godless universe, and the positioning of a female perspective in that world. Mary Shelley felt that women had something to say and were *somebodies*, especially in a world where all the meanings were human ones. Because women were second class and not even citizens in the eighteenth-century, Mary developed this message indirectly.

There is something missing in this novel, but unlike religion, its absence is surprising. If there was a potential monster – a great fear -- in the minds of many nineteenth-century British authors, especially those influenced by the French Revolution, it was the masses. It would be intriguing to symbolize the Monster as being this threatening new class of people. One could, for example, extend the symbol in order to argue that the education of this class of people was essential for shaping a new world or at least preventing social conflict and catastrophe. The Monster does perform manual work for his adopted family, suggesting perhaps that he could be a labourer. But I think that that any evidence for such an interpretation would be flimsy.

Consider that when we talk about the working masses, we are talking about the vast majority of the population, and a group that almost certainly would have included you and me, in the nineteenth-century. Mary Shelley, like her husband, certainly believes in a central humanity shared by all people. But she's still highly elitist in her attitudes. She may want a certain equality for women but does not dream of social equality. The only obviously working class character in the novel is Justine; and although she is humanized through sympathy, she remains a social inferior and a stereotype of the *people below*.

You might argue that there is also a family of *cottagers* who are central to the denouement of the novel and its message. But the cottage is not so much the real home of real working people as it is kind of agrarian pastoral environment for a sentimentalized family. And the De Lacy family are not your average villagers; as their name suggests, they are an upper class family that has fallen on hard times. Their reading material and sentimental values clearly establish them as the social superiors of the other villagers. While they are victims of an increasingly commercial and bureaucratic society, there is very little analysis of that society or its political or economic foundation in the novel. In

some ways, the novel is not modern at all because the novelist does not operate in any recognizably *real* modern world but navigates certain *abstractions about modernity*.

Consider how different *Frankenstein* would have been if it had incorporated some of the insights of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels about the modern age. Capitalism, aided by technology, was utilizing the masses of the population to make huge profits for the few, and dehumanizing them in the process. That might have been a very different kind of monster story! To be fair to the Romantics, you might also want to consider how differently *The Communist Manifesto* might have read if it wasn't so optimistic about the benefits of modern technology and didn't put so much faith in a scientific utopia.

## The Dandy (Stroller) in the City

### A Brief Snapshot of Baudelaire

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821-1867) is considered by many to be the quintessential poet of modernity. Before I get to why he got the label and why it is worth reading his poetry, I should give you a brief snapshot of his most fascinating life. He came from a well-to-do family, as a result of which he was spoiled. He lost his father as a child and was a real mother's boy. He hated his stepfather, General Aupick, in ways that seem very Freudian (Oedipus conflict). His teenage years were troubled, to say the least. He got kicked out of an upper class Parisian school, called a lycée, at your age because his ideas were too radical and he offended everyone, even though he showed talent as a student of classical literature and a poet in Latin. Once he got out, Baudelaire adopted a bohemian lifestyle; with his goatee and longhair he became addicted to sex, drugs and clothes, running up huge debts with landlords and tailors, all on the basis that he would come into his dead father's estate at 21. Because he was so bad with money, his mother and stepfather had the inheritance turned over to a legal guardian to pay off the debts and dole out the rest in ways that totally curbed his lifestyle. Now he dressed in black, a clothing choice which he later helped to make fashionable.

Black symbolized a lot of things for Baudelaire; it marked him out as an unhappy and morbid outsider to some but he chided that he was the undertaker to the bourgeoisie or capitalist society that was emerging in France and Europe generally. Above all else, the black suit allowed him to play the role of the *dandy* at a greatly reduced cost. He spent the rest of his life trying to sponge off his mother and to publishing poems and freelance works of literary criticism that brought in a few franks here and there. As someone who only had relationships with prostitutes or courtesans, several of which are immortalized in his poems, it is hardly surprising that he died of complications from syphilis (venereal disease) at the fairly young age of 46. Appropriately, he died in the arms of his mother.

At the young age of 27, however, Baudelaire published a shocking book of poems entitled *The Flowers of Evil*. The original title was going to be even more shocking for Catholic French readers; it was going to be *The Lesbians*. The title change didn't get it past the censors, however, and several of the poems, including the ones on lesbianism got banned. Lucky you, you get to read them in the modern editions. Some that you would expect to have been banned didn't, like the one on necrophilia where someone is making love to a headless corpse of a beautiful woman, probably because the government readers were too dumb to understand it. Baudelaire expected these poems to make him rich and famous, and he poured his whole heart and soul into them. They didn't; instead they left him poor and infamous as a 'shock' poet with a frivolous lifestyle. While few contemporary readers and many later poets and even rock musicians like Courtney Love of Hole would embrace Baudelaire, he was sometimes forced to disown his dark poetry as something of an artistic exercise not to be taken too seriously. But it was very serious indeed in a very modern way.

Now, if you have been reading the poems carefully, you have a right to wonder what it is that is so *modern* about this stuff. Hopefully, you played the devil's advocate a bit. After all, we are talking about lyric poetry that rhymes for gosh sake. And if you know anything about poetry, these poems are composed in a highly classical form by a guy who was trained at school to write Latin poetry. Poetry of this kind seems rather old fashioned and even Baudelaire abandoned it later to adopt a more obviously modern prose poem style. Moreover, you have a right to be a bit pissed with me for giving you poems that constantly refer to Greek gods and goddesses; you either have to be trained in the classics or to keep reading damn footnotes to figure out who they are. It's as if the Greeks and Biblical characters are just as real to him as the people he runs into in the Paris streets. You certainly wouldn't go around describing prostitutes or homeless females in downtown Toronto as Virgin Queens and Madonnas and Nymphs and Venuses or medieval characters engaged in a *danse macabre*. Give me a break, Professor Dwyer, you might well say.

And, of course, it's pretty damn clear that a great deal of what we consider to be 'modern' Baudelaire ignores. And what he doesn't ignore, he often detests. There is absolutely nothing in these descriptions about commerce, innovation, revolutions, or even the metamorphosis of the city that he so obviously loved. When he wrote, Paris was being transformed into a modern city with the famous boulevards along which lovers walk and make Paris in the springtime what it is. He has little time for what he calls the "Modern Carrousel" in the poem *The Swan* and he says "alas" that things are changing so quickly. The "old neighborhoods" have much greater meaning for him, and the meanings are *allegorical*. Allegorical means that they are symbols for human experience and memory rather than having meaning and significance in their own right. If we want to argue that Baudelaire is modern, then it must mean something quite different, and perhaps more interesting than the conventional meaning. Another great French poet, Paul Verlaine suggests that what Baudelaire represents is not modern civilization but *modern man*:

Modern man, made what he is by the refinements of excessive civilization,  
modern man with his sharpened and vibrant senses, his painfully subtle mind, his  
brain saturated with tobacco, and his blood poisoned by alcohol.

We can expand this to describe the modern urban type so prominent in Toronto -- the nervous, fretty, self-absorbed and cool loner looking for love and finding solace in anti-depressive drugs. Someone, in other words, that a thoroughly rural person or an authentic Newfoundlander might regard as a highly unstable person. Such descriptions of the modern urban type obviously have parallels in *The Flowers of Evil*. But I think that Baudelaire provides us with much more insight into the modern personality and has a much more interesting take on modern art and the modern artist than such vague descriptions.

### **The Engaged Flâneur**

Baudelaire called himself a *flâneur*. A *flâneur* is a stroller. A social stroller is somebody who walks around largely closed off from the other people around her but who takes in the ambience, who is cool and detached but leaving openings for pleasure to enter consciousness, and is in fact a sophisticated hunter of new experiences that are internalized to form a unique self. Such a person does not necessarily need to live in a city but they have to possess *urbane* values. One way of describing the demeanor of a sophisticated stroller is to say that they have a remarkable capacity for being a closed self or an “I” and an almost insatiable appetite for the “not I” whenever it suits her. Another way of describing the sophisticated stroller is to suggest that she is highly tuned to *complexity and difference* and the possibilities these offers for protecting, nurturing and enriching the self. Yet another way of describing the sophisticated stroller is someone who is adept at both *being* and *not being* when it suits. The key requirement for sophisticated strolling, of course, is leisure.

If this sounds like gobbilty gook, I’d like you to regard it as very interesting and insightful gobbilty gook. You will never understand what is interesting about the modern world if you are not willing to deal with certain subtleties that we too often take for granted. In the urban environment, life moves more quickly. There are more sensations to deal with. You have far greater choice as to what sensations you want to entertain or to assimilate. You have the opportunity to lose yourself in whatever is new. You have the ability to move with the crowd or to completely chill out even when in the crowd. Because you are surrounded by stimuli, there is always the chance that something completely new will come your way. This is not traditional village life; this is the excitement of the bright lights of the city that the moralists used to warn villagers about. On the positive side, because there are so many possibilities, anything is possible. As the song goes – “some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, you may see a stranger, across a crowded room, and somehow you know, you know even then, that someday you’ll see her again and again.” The anticipation doesn’t apply only to love. It can apply to a whole host of things. My ex-wife decided on her career talking to someone at a party. I decided to become an academic when I heard a great lecture by a professor. Last year I was a Social Scientist teaching courses on business; this year I get to teach poetry to Humanities students. All things are possible.

The stroller never knows who are what he is going to meet when out strolling. That’s why social strolling is so exciting. In the poem *To a Woman Passing By*, Baudelaire illuminates the spell of the street in ways that can only be described as ‘kinky’. It’s a “deafening street” and the woman in question is wearing black. likely because her husband or child just died. But because it is life passing in the crowd, the poet can safely make eye contact and, whether or not he imagines the connection, the powerful possibility that they could have been lovers infuses his entire being to the extent that he says that he is “reborn”. Everyone who has strolled in the city has had that momentary but explosive experience of making eye contact with someone from the opposite sex. When you are idling and safe, it can make your day. But it can also be terrifying, especially for female strollers. In the village environment, everyone knows everybody; but in the urbanized world where everyone is a stranger, everyone is also a potential stalker. You never know exactly “who” the stranger at the gate really is. What is more,

if you understand the nature of modern individuality as hyper and differentially stimulated, you cannot even know with any precision exactly who *you* are. While closed and closeted, the stroller seems safe. But this is an illusion because the urban environment is full of horrors, especially for the engaged flâneur. In fact, one of the most fascinating characteristics of modernity is that *everything is an illusion* because everything is temporary and depends on the mind of the observer. Anything and everything has the potential to be a fad, and as modern reality television shows, even reality is a fad and anyone can be famous for 15 minutes.

This may sound like mall culture. Mall culture – infinite consumption – is only possible in a modern society where the self is constantly being built up and constantly changing. The poet for Baudelaire is not a simplistic shopper at the mall but a highly self-conscious and engaged flâneur. What is the main difference between you and I, and the kind of ‘painter of modern life’ that Baudelaire set out to be? It is the poet’s self-conscious and expert ability to move back and forth between the crowd and himself and to recognize the kaleidoscope of “singular and multiple, diffuse and contained, open and closed”. Most of us are locked up in one of two ways. Either we are totally absorbed with ourselves (as is Baudelaire, by the way, when he is not being a poet) and are almost completely egoistic and obsessed with our own pleasure. Or we are so much a part of the crowd, or our career, or our peer group that we are machines in a cage or mindless automata. Being mindless, for Baudelaire, has nothing to do with success or the lack thereof. It means swallowing the bullshit or agenda of bourgeois society.

The engaged stroller is highly reflective. What the discriminating stroller knows and what others do not know is the extent to which human life is jam-packed with illusions that we desire to be true. Every so-called truth is an artificial construction; a desire to sugar coat our basically meaningless and absurd lives. The only sensible conclusion that you can come to if you are an observant people watcher in large cities is that everyone is making up artificial realities for themselves. There is no reality because everything of significance is a symbol of desire. Being authentic – and Baudelaire was concerned to be authentic – in an artificial world means understanding and embracing artifice. If you know that everything is an artificial symbol, only then can you freely choose your brand of poison rather than having others choose for you. What does this mean? Well, it might mean that you create meanings and an identity for yourself using whatever artificial means and stimulants you can. You can, for example, use fashion. You can use cosmetics. Baudelaire used both in order to create a fashion for himself that sent a signal about who he was -- the dandy.

The dandy is someone who creates his or her own image. The superior dandy, rather than the mall consumer, is someone whose image is non conventional. What the dandy understands is that modern life is either a mindless following of whatever fashions predominate or the projection of an identity. But if such a projection is really mindful, Baudelaire suggests, then the projector must understand the enormous stakes that are involved in the game of life. Life has no meaning other than such projections. If there is no fixed reality, there can be no fixed truth. If anyone tells you that they possess the truth, says Baudelaire, you should start running, but especially from the bourgeoisie.



Now, you might ask why Baudelaire hates the bourgeoisie, or capitalist middle class that is beginning to run the European world, so much? After all, in a different way from Marx, he styles himself as their undertaker. That's why he's the man in black. And the reason that he hates the bourgeoisie and bourgeois realism so much isn't simply because its philosophies are not true; it's because the world that the bourgeoisie is creating is so ugly.

### **Dandy Aesthetics at the Abyss**

If Baudelaire had lived 50 years earlier, there is no doubt that he would have been a romantic. There are romantic tendencies in his poems, but they are always undercut by a focus on the misery of life and human relations. The romantics may not have been the world's most consistent thinkers but they believed that life had a meaning, that meaning revolved around the connection between human beings and nature, and that the connecting thread that tied everything together was *beauty*. Baudelaire was on a similar mission to discover and affirm beauty but, as an urban stroller in a meaningless world, he couldn't buy into a naïve and hippy dippy theories like "everyone is beautiful", "all you need is love", and "let's get back to nature". In a fascinating poem entitled *The Setting of the Romantic Sun*, Baudelaire suggested that he would have liked to embrace the "dying God" of the romantics, but that the romantic vision of beauty had reached a dead end. Romanticism had led to a literary dark age without anything to say to modern men that was not puerile and inauthentic. Even worse, romanticism had been appropriated by the bourgeoisie as the kind of pabulum that you feed to masses to make them feel that everything will work out. Love and nature was well on its way to becoming the fodder of popular culture.

What the early romantics did that Baudelaire respected was to oppose the ideal of beauty to a crass and vulgar society that valued everything according to its utility or exchange value. Art needed to be opposed to utilitarian calculation, Baudelaire believed, but not a kind of soporific to dull the crowd into acceptance. Realizing that modern art needed to take a much more urbane and combative position led Baudelaire in an interesting and influential direction. At first, Baudelaire aligned himself with the "Art for Art's Sake" movement which forced a sharp break between art and capitalist society. While this movement ostensibly protected art from capitalist assimilation and provided a special realm in which the artistic exchange of ideas could be facilitated, it did not for long hold Baudelaire's attention because it so completely rejected material life. Whoa, Professor Dwyer, I hear you saying. Earlier you told us that Baudelaire wasn't interested in material civilization or progress or the bourgeois reality that was so overwhelmingly materialistic. That must mean that he's mainly interested in the conceptual world of symbols. And since all symbols are artificial constructions that don't speak directly to material conditions of life, Baudelaire's emphasis must be subjective. Isn't that why, Professor Dwyer, Baudelaire had to break with the romantics because they believed in a material nature and human nature and hadn't made the leap to subjectivity.

If you said that, you would be exactly right. And certainly the artists who were most influenced by Baudelaire, the symbolists, created paintings that used symbols to convey

subjective meanings that have no obvious reference to the material conditions of life. But although nobody appreciated symbols more than Baudelaire, he always wanted to ground those symbols to communicate a shared experience. Rejecting materialism does not mean rejecting the modern world, which is, after all, the only world that we live in. Living in the modern world means embracing the modern self and its experience. You can't hide in romanticism; even if the modern experience is something of an abyss that results in vertigo and spleen, you have to work through it. Never one to detach himself from the world, he was an urban person who wanted to say something about the urban experience and what makes him especially interesting is that he wanted to communicate with and educate his readers in a new and modern synthesis of beauty.

A useful distinction to make in order to appreciate just how modern Baudelaire is, is the distinction between urbanity and urban. Baudelaire thought that the modern city was ugly but he most certainly did not wish, like the romantics, to reject the city for the countryside. He loved city life because it allowed him room to discover himself and provided the resources, the shared experience, that set free his creativity. John Lennon, once asked about how he felt about New York, said that he both hated it and loved it. He loved it because it was the center of the modern universe and he hated it because it contained so many hateful things, including, as he said in one song, acres of "steel and glass". It was the intellectual and artistic pulse of urban New York, not its skyscrapers that excited Lennon. Similarly, Baudelaire loved Parisian life. *His* nature was the "chimney pipes, steeples" of Paris; his clouds were the "rivers of chimney smoke"; his nature "walks" were through the morning "mist" where "ghosts in daylight tug at the stroller's sleeve" (i.e. where people were shadowy, mysterious and the walking dead), his rainbows are prisms through an apartment window glass and his "fairy palaces" consisted of a room with a fireplace and a desk where he can create meaningful beauties.

Creating modern and meaningful beauties was what Baudelaire was all about. But that meant embracing the essential chaos of the urban experience. It also meant embracing the *irony* of modernity, i.e. that there was no such thing as permanent truth or beauty because the modern experience showed that life, ultimately, was meaningless. It also meant living in a permanent state of *paradox* because modern life was so obviously contradictory, a mixture of good and evil that no longer bore any relation to beauty. Plato, Christianity and the entire western tradition had obsessed with making the good beautiful and the beautiful good. As such, it always had either hatred or ambivalence for the urban experience as a wandering from ideal forms or the Garden of Eden. Embracing modernity means living with *ambivalence* and problematizing morality. For the artist, it poses an entirely new challenge, that of redefining beauty without reference to traditional notions of good and evil. Baudelaire is one of the first to begin this reconstruction by showing us the *flowers* or beauty in what we used to consider *evil*.

By creating new, transient beauties or ideals that relate to our shared experience, Baudelaire wanted to show people how to reappropriate the beautiful in a very ugly society. In order to achieve that goal – we should emphasize that it is a moral goal, albeit not in the conventional sense -- the poet or artist has to dwell at the margins of the human condition and manage the sense of vertigo that one feels who is brave enough to look

directly into the abyss. In simple words, the poet must be prepared to suffer vertigo for the sake of humanity.

It is too easy to view modern artists like Baudelaire as *bohemians* who affect alienated attitudes in order to feel superior to ordinary people. Of course, there is that element of smug superiority in Baudelaire but there is so much more as well. Baudelaire believes that the artist has a moral duty to sit at the edge of the abyss of modern life, to disavow all of those devices that most people use to hide from the meaninglessness of their lives, and to pay whatever price is necessary for pushing people out of their complacency. Part of the modern artist's role is to 'suffer'. First, he must observe and record unsentimentally and unreservedly the human condition without recourse to any romantic lenses. Only then can the artist hope to display the kind of tangible if transient beauties that are available to modern consciousness. Second, he must be as honest with himself as with others, indicating that the soul of the artist is essentially no different from any other human being. This means that he cannot hide from the ugliness in his own nature. Third, he must deploy 'shock' tactics in order to clear the air of false conceptions of truth, morality and beauty, to which people, including other so-called artists, like to cling. This means that he will be attacked and vilified by others. Now, the suffering artist can also be a *role* that individuals play in order to acquire the status of the artist. Baudelaire once likened that status to the halo of the saint in medieval times, but he suggested in some of his poems that the genuine modern artist had to be prepared to lose his halo in the muddy streets of Paris.

## Ennui

The term *ennui* or *spleen* run through Baudelaire's poetry and are usually translated in English as "boredom". If we are going to get a grasp of Baudelaire's relevance for we moderns, we have to translate the term a bit better than that. Another definition might be "sickening depression" because that would get us closer to the sense of vertigo that Baudelaire feels when looking into the modern abyss. It was a scary thing for someone raised in Catholic France to look into the kind of meaninglessness that modernity suggested. It could produce a kind of nausea, which, incidentally is the way that the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre stereotyped Baudelaire's poetry. The problem with that definition is that it loses the idea of boredom that is so central to *ennui*. It's hard to be bored and nauseous at the same time.

Better than relying on definitions, therefore, is getting a sense of what Baudelaire means by *ennui*. It is also more useful to aim for a kind of appreciation that is a bit intangible because *you*, if you are also modern, should be able to relate to it. The poet uses *ennui* expertly, but every modern person must experience it to some degree. I want you to ask yourself if you can identify with a paradox. Modern urban life is often very exciting, isn't it? The sensations can be so unusual and irregular and striking. Even those who yearn for a more simple life often find the stimulation of the city so very appealing. And yet, doesn't the constant stimulation have a tendency to increase boredom? Isn't it the case that you crave extreme stimulation, as simplistically as in amusement parks or at horror movies, and everything else seems *boring*? Don't we constantly seek change in

ourselves as well as our surroundings? Aren't we perfect hypocrites about putting absolute faith into some symbols today that we reject tomorrow? Today it's fitness, tomorrow it's Jesus, the day after tomorrow it's the latest computer technology that will solve all our problems.

How many of us who live in modern society have a tendency at times to become bored with anything and everything. The early punk rock movement really put its finger on the problem by suggesting that modern life, *all the mod coms*, ultimately led to boredom. The Jam and the Sex Pistols defined the genre but the Buzzcocks had the best song, appropriately entitled *boredom*. Appropriately, this music all came from big modern cities, most lately Manchester, England with a group called Joy Division. Like Baudelaire, there is little in this music that discusses the progress, materialism, technology of modern society but the air that this music breathes is entirely urban with its focus on the individual reaction to a rich, chaotic and yet somehow stifling experience. What Baudelaire, perhaps the very first underground rock star, captured more completely than any of these was the boredom leading to depression that characterizes modern life. In a famous poem "The Love of Illusion" in *Parisian Scenes*, Baudelaire paints an entirely modern woman. Through the city's gas lights, Baudelaire sees a woman all decked out with makeup, big hair, jewelry and perfume. Her appearance is stunning, but her attitude is the opposite. She's totally bored with the game. Baudelaire sees right through to "the ennui of her soul". And what's important here is that she's just like many other women and men who go through the relatively meaningless motions. Underneath it all, this seemingly aloof beauty is just a little sad

Baudelaire's solution to this kind of boredom and mild depression is fascinating. Instead of being bored at having to play the game or saddened by the fact that it is just a game or hoping for something more real or exciting, HE ADVISES US TO EMBRACE ARTIFICE WITHOUT BEING ARTIFICIAL. Being artificial means trying to appear to be something that one is not, but embracing artifice and illusion means choosing to play the game, enjoying it, finding pleasure in making oneself a pleasing illusion, enjoying the effect of the illusion on others. In other words, if life is only a game, then learn to enjoy playing it with others. Consciously be aware of the affect that what you do has on others, but don't ever think that you are going to discover something 'real' under the makeup. All we are is makeup. All life is a stylized game. The important thing is to play it consciously and with your own style. Baudelaire is not only thoroughly French but thoroughly modern in suggesting that humans be gourmands in life and relationships. Being a gourmand means developing a refined *taste*. The gourmand is a highly selective collector of refined experiences. The gourmand is the stroller.

Among these refined experiences are stimulants such as drugs and alcohol. Baudelaire was a staunch advocate of wines and opiates. He wrote many poems on wine and one famous poem entitled "Get Drunk!" Now, many people, perhaps including some of you, indulge in alcohol and drugs. But I suspect that most of you are not Baudelairian strollers or gourmands. The crucial thing about such stimulants for Baudelaire is to embrace all possible kinds of experience. It is the opposite of *escaping* reality. It is all about enhancing experience. In the poem "Get Drunk", Baudelaire does not distinguish

between “wine, poetry, or virtue” as possible intoxicants. But the point is to “get drunk” on whatever you “choose” and to “never pause for rest”. Living is about experiences, and the entire point of life is to experience as much as possible. The remedy for boredom should never be escape but refined stimulation. The word that Baudelaire likes to use is *volupté* rather than indiscriminate pleasure seeking. Drugs especially are useful for intensifying, amplifying and stretching the possibilities of experience. But a meditative rather than escapist use of drugs is crucial. Baudelaire was *avant garde* not only in presenting the artist as a certain kind of alienated being, but also making the modern artist the cultivator and communicator of intense, intoxicating and often shocking experiences.

So far we have only been talking about strategies for dealing with life’s boredom and I hope that you can appreciate what Baudelaire is suggesting. You don’t have to agree with him, but you should be appreciating how very modern this viewpoint is. In the 1960s, for example, a similar interpretation was very prevalent as young people sought new experiences, stimulated by sex, drugs and rock and roll. There is, however, the distinct possibility that a more serious depression than morbid boredom emerges alongside modern consciousness. A famous sociologist, Emile Durkheim, suggested that the large urban centers of the nineteenth-century had become *suicidecentric zones*. Depression leading to suicide is an entirely modern phenomenon that can be attributed to the freedom that individuals have to determine the quality of their life and the gap between their lived reality and the life of their imagination. Baudelaire was very well acquainted with these modern poles of existence, which is precisely why he wanted to stretch out the artistic possibilities of lived reality as far as possible. In fact the entire thematic of the section of poems “Spleen and the Ideal” depends on the tensions generated by boredom and depression to discover the ideal beauties imaginable in context of modern life.

Unlike the average person, the artist absolutely must look into the depressive abyss of his own soul in order to “stroll” purposefully in life. That is the motivator to discover beautiful alternatives to bourgeois utilitarianism or indiscriminate pleasure seeking. That is what is needed to artistically re-imagine modern life. Serious depressives are the necessary counterparts to artistic illuminations that are capable of being shared. The artist is consciously manic-depressive. We know from his more autobiographical poems Baudelaire chose this journey over pleasure seeking for himself at a fairly early age, but despite all of his strategies and tactics, it was not easy for him to sustain this deliberate imbalance. The poem about a painting by his friend Constantin Guys entitled “Parisian Dream”, talks about what a constant temptation it is to abandon reality in favour of the imagination, and how teeth shattering it is to come back to that reality:

Open, my ardent eyes could see  
The horror of my wretched hole;  
I felt my cursed cares to be  
A needle entering my soul,

The clock proclaimed the time was noon  
In accents brutal and perverse,

And from the musty sky a gloom,  
Poured through the torpid universe.

Living with tension, however, is perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of modernity and his ability to do so is precisely what makes Baudelaire such an important poet of modernity.

### **Heroes in Wartime**

“Life in Wartime” is the title of a Talking Heads song that describes the feelings of isolation, personality disorder and transient joys that characterize modernity. Baudelaire’s poetry was really the first to traverse this modern terrain full of tensions and ambiguities. At the heart of this tension, is the city itself. Not the city so much as a physical reality as the way in which it appears to the psyche. For example, in “Parisian Dream”, the city is brutal and bestial. In other poems like “Landscape” it is not only beautiful but the chief source of inspiration for the modern poet. As far as the artist is concerned, the modern city (i.e. modernity) is a battleground in which there is no ultimate reality but only survival strategies. Since there is no truth, any talk about victory would be senseless. All that is possible are affirmations in the valley of death.

In this ambiguous battlefield, there are no saints because sainthood implies a clear notion of right and wrong. But there are heroes. The artist may be the closest thing to a ‘hero’ in this context because the artist has the courage to stand at the abyss. The artist “experiences the paradoxes and illusions of modern life” close up. He or she also has to exercise constant determination vigilance to avoid “psychological disintegration and a loss of coherence” in the modern fragmented world. There are other obvious kinds of heroes as well. The self-conscious stroller and the dandy are heroes to the extent that they shape themselves and their lives with as much autonomy as is possible. Baudelaire incorporated the artist and the dandy in his own life. Less obvious and more interesting, perhaps, are the semi-heroic qualities that Baudelaire attributes to those groups who are least contaminated by the values of bourgeois civilization. I’ll talk about these types in a moment.

The thing that I find most interesting about Baudelaire is that, although he is a product of bourgeois urban capitalism, he is at war with it. He’s not only a warrior because he confronts the abyss of modern consciousness of life as meaningless. He’s also a warrior whose “hero’s iron nerve” is “set against my spirit’s lassitude” whenever he goes out for a ‘stroll’. Finally, he’s a warrior because he thinks bourgeois capitalism is hideous, the closest thing to being wrong to a modern artist. Like many modern artists, he suspects that the struggle is doomed and that the very best that he can achieve is to give a beautiful form to the fragmented and limited experiences that are available. There is never any doubt, however, that capitalist society is the enemy because it elevates profit and utility above any other kind of value. Baudelaire strikes at the very heart of modern capitalism because it does thrive upon those values.

The second thing that I find interesting about Baudelaire is that, although his interests are aesthetic rather than sociological, he focuses on groups of people who have been either overlooked or regimented in the past. He illuminates what you and I might call *anti-heroes* such as prostitutes, rag-pickers, the blind, old men and women and, of course, workers. Karl Marx might glorify the working class as the inheritors of some future foreseeable human city, but Baudelaire admires them just as they are – honest and hardworking -- in *Parisian Scenes*. Karl Marx was so much a fan of bourgeois capitalism as to dismiss as ‘lumpen proletariat’ those who made their way in the underclass of crime and prostitution, but Baudelaire humanized them. To cite but one example of an entirely new perspective on human life, in “Dusk”:

Old Prostitution blazes in the streets;  
 She opens out her nest-of-ants retreat;  
 Everywhere she clears the secret routes,  
 A stealthy force preparing for a coup...  
 The playhouse screech, the blaring of a band.  
 The tables at the inns where gamesmen sport  
 Are full of swindlers, sluts, and all their sort.  
 Robbers who show no pity to their prey,  
 Get ready for their nightly work-a-day  
 Of cracking safes and deftly forcing doors,  
 To live a few days more and dress their whores.

All of this “clamour from the slime” is just as much a part of modernity as all of its technological progress and capitalist economy. Baudelaire makes the underbelly live, typically without any negative judgment of those engaged in salacious activities. What Baudelaire so clearly makes us see is that all of these people are the same as us, even in their lusts. He is able to see the ‘swan in the city’ in everyone. At the same time, he equalizes everyone who, like the swan, are all ‘captives’ to death.

One of the most intriguing poems in *Parisian Scenes* is also highly metaphorical of life during wartime. “Gaming” describes courtesans and aristocratic gamblers who play the game of life not only “with lust” but also with “honour and beauty”. In a world that is bereft of “signification and value” these gamers gallantly strategize in hope of a victory from “suffering” and “Hell” that they realistically cannot expect. Even more revealing, however, in this and the other Parisian poems, is the relationship between the subject (i.e. gamblers) and the speaker. In “Gaming” in particular, what becomes clear is that the real warfare is going on in the poet’s mind. The modern city is a battleground, but the city is not the ultimate object, the ultimate object is the “speaker’s relation to them [scenes and events in the city] and his responses to that relation”.

The city itself may be a battlefield, but the urban guerrilla warfare takes place in the mind. The modern and aware person has a stark choice. Heaven and Hell are in the mind. Either he or she can become a victim of that self-awareness or can chart a creative passage through negativity.

## Death in Battle

The ultimate negativity, the terminus of self-consciousness, for Baudelaire is death. For the Catholic France in which Baudelaire was raised, upon death we can either go to Heaven or Hell based on the choices that we have made in this life. This Catholic Christianity differs from its English and North American Protestant counterpart in so far as the emphasis is on deeds rather than faith and hierarchical supports rather than an individual relationship to God. I don't want to go into the ways that the distinctly Catholic religion influenced Baudelaire's poetry other than to say that, for a Catholic, the entry into a modern consciousness much have been much more traumatic than for a Protestant, whose independence and individuality was more culturally prepared. That is why, perhaps, Baudelaire felt that he was contemplating a terrifying abyss. That may also be why Baudelaire transported so much traditional religious imagery, especially the Satanic focus, into his poetry.

The bottom line for us is that, for anyone raised in a dogmatic religious environment, the confrontation with a meaningless modern death must have been especially dramatic and traumatic. The fear of death haunts *The Flowers of Evil*. Because Baudelaire's consciousness is entirely modern – i.e. it is not the object itself but one's reaction and reflection upon illusory objects that is significant – what is at stake is not simply one's own individual death but the annihilation of the universe! Thus, when Baudelaire looks for the meaning of life, all that he can see is death, and it leaves him terrified. Any obsession can lead to fetishism. Certainly. Baudelaire had a morbid fascination with death that was shared by many nineteenth-century French intellectuals and artists who confronted modern consciousness bereft of the Catholic apparatus of salvation.

Arguably, however, one of the characteristics that makes Baudelaire so useful for all of us postmoderns is that he puts death at the center of discussion. We have become so adept at diffusing the discussion of death that we suffer our modern depressions in a vacuum, and some of us even contemplate suicide without much compunction, and certainly not fear of the life to come. Death, however, is a central fact of human life and if some of us moderns have got rid of religion, then we have to find some way of confronting death. For Baudelaire, death may have been horrifying but it was also an essential lesson for life. In a poem entitled "Remorse After Death", Baudelaire suggests that "The Tomb [capitalized] grasps what the poet has to say". What does the poet have to say? LIVE YOUR LIFE CONSCIOUSLY. INTENSIFY EXPERIENCES. MAKE USE OF DEATH TO TRULY LIVE. This isn't just about seeking pleasure; far from it. It is about collecting and magnifying sensations. It is about actively strolling, stalking life if you will. It is about appreciating moments. And, most of all, negatively, it is about *not missing those moments* because of inertia, false social conventions, dogmatic attitudes, and, especially, false ideas of good and evil.

Life is a battlefield with numerous forces aligned against the self. It takes the attitude of a warrior to overcome fear of death in order to shape life on your own terms. It requires a highly ironic attitude to realize that most of what we celebrate in life is on its way to death. That is precisely why Baudelaire wants to push his morbid descriptions of death



into our face, to talk about Tombs [with a capital T], and worms eating out of your flesh. That is why he celebrates the work of Edgar Allan Poe. That is why he recommended the “charms of horror”. It’s because the horror of death can really makes us appreciate what life is all about. The poem “Skeletons’ Digging” discusses what potentially happens in the grave. Old books show skeletons digging up corpses. Baudelaire suggests that we might not “know the sleep we have been promised” in the grave. “Not being” will “not keep its faith” means that we need to keep death scary. That is why Baudelaire couldn’t be satisfied with any interpretation of death that equates it with “nothingness” or repose. That is why the imagery of Satan and Hell continue to have significance for him. Knowing that we are all “dead men walking” is what shakes us out of our boredom and lethargy.

Notice how Baudelaire and his colleague Ernest Christophe make use of the medieval image of the dancing skeleton in *Danse macabre*. The dancing skeleton was used by the medieval Catholic Church to remind everyone that they are going to die and that they had better seek salvation. There is, of course, no salvation in Baudelaire’s poetry and Heaven and Hell are largely in the modern mind, but the skeleton dressed up to go out for a dance can still remind us that life is impermanent. We have the opportunity to give it temporary and transient meanings but only if we are vigilant and don’t simply go with the current. Both our own body and society push up obstacles in the way of shaping our lives, so the warrior status must be maintained right up to death. Focusing on the Tomb is not simply a relic of a religious age, it is absolutely crucial if modern men and women are going to make sense of their lives.

Another way to think of this is that, like everything in human life, death is not so much an event as a human and symbolic response and reflection upon an event. Death cannot simply be a termination point if it is to communicate *human* meaning. Capitalist society shoves death under the carpet of utilitarian pleasure seeking. Baudelaire wanted to weave it right back into the center of the human carpet. While the nineteenth century began to rehabilitate suicide as the terminus to a painful existence, Baudelaire like the gamblers in his poem “Gaming” clearly preferred “Suffering to death, and Hell to nothingness!”

### **‘La Vie Moderne’**

In this section, I want to emphasize some of the central themes in Baudelaire’s poetry, not all of which can be found in *Parisian Scenes*. Where themes are not addressed in the city poems, however, they can be implied. What you want to be doing is to ask questions like: What kind of modern individual does Baudelaire promote? How can you feed on the crowd without becoming a mindless member of the herd? What kind of person would be a hero to Baudelaire? What is modern sex all about? Can there be love in the city? You can make intelligent guesses at answering all of these questions about *la vie moderne* if you’ve read *Parisian Scenes* carefully. And thinking about these questions and answers might get you interested in reading some of the other poems.

### *Heroes and Anti-Heroes*

In an essay entitled “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire argued that the modern artist or poet had an almost impossible task. Previously, the poet or artist’s job was to present beauty or truth, however these might be defined. Obviously, there was a belief that beauty and truth existed. In the modern age of perpetual change, there was no longer any agreement or anticipation of agreement about beauty and truth apart from our fleeting reaction to sensory experiences and events. The modern artist, therefore, had the unenviable task of trying to distill the beautiful from the transitory. The bottom line for Baudelaire was that you had to maintain contact with and observation of what was transitory to get at what was ideal. Moreover, you had to find beauty (flowers) wherever possible, even in those areas formerly deemed off limits for beauty (evil). While you were not confined by some abstract notion of reality, you had to embed yourself in what was reality for your times.

### **Jazz**

Modern art, like modern music, now becomes much more concerned with what is fleeting, contingent and transitory. A good contemporary example is jazz, especially improvisational jazz or jamming, because it makes use of popular tunes, is highly experimental, consists of a momentary performance. Jazz makes free use of contemporary melodies to form a structure around which musicians improvise whereas classical music, prior to the nineteenth-century, absolutely rejected anything remotely popular. Pop culture cannot be said to have existed prior to the nineteenth-century, but now artists began to make use of it for their own purposes. The line between popular and serious art gets very blurred.

This new understanding altered the function of the artist for Baudelaire. Now the artist had to be a *flâneur* or stroller who was a spectator of modern life and who found inspiration, not in abstract eternal models, but life on the street. By understanding what goes on in street, the artist gets two things. First the artist gets ideas from the fads and intoxications of the crowd. Second, the artist can measure the distance necessary to shock and challenge the crowd. But the only way the artist can do this is simultaneously to keep in touch and yet retain some spectatorial distance so as to preserve her own integrity and internal resources. The main danger is that the artist will be co-opted by the crowd and seek its approval. Another danger is that the artist will become so internally focused as to experience psychological disintegration.

Not everyone can be a bohemian artist hero, but anyone who is aware is capable of developing the kind of ironic detachment that the artist and his work embody. After Baudelaire, a new kind of literary hero emerges who is both a part of and apart from society, who straddles the tensions without ever losing sight of a self that is ultimately intangible. Heroes of old either courageously defended society (finding their ideal symbol in the leader or soldier) or stood solitary and unflinching against society (the tragic hero). Because modernity is ambiguous, those clear choices are no longer possible and what is heroic is capable of being redefined as the anti-hero, neither someone who is for or against a given social definition but someone who doesn’t fit such simple

clarifications. Baudelaire writes poems about prostitutes, workers, the elderly, beggars and others that demonstrate this utterly modern anti-heroic perspective that pervades modern literature.

### *Vigilantly Avoiding Cooptation*

#### **Co-Optation**

Baudelaire didn't have to worry too much about success, but the modern marketplace for art, especially music, presents a real problem for the artist. Nirvana's lead singer found success to be the biggest problem for retaining artistic integrity and became psychologically unhinged. At the other end of the spectrum, we know of lots of so-called artists who became repetitive caricatures of themselves. Some of the bloated rockers of modernity are perfect examples.

A broader problem, argued Baudelaire, was that the resources for the artist of modern life were too easily funneled into mindless consumption, what we today would call middle-of-the road music or mass market literature or decorator art. This problem was made much worse by modern technologies that could mass market any artistic productions conceivable. He typically refused to allow himself to be photographed because he thought that this new technology was replacing serious art. Baudelaire and many of his colleagues supported impressionist art precisely because it differed from a photograph but what they didn't count on was the development of photographic equipment that could produce fine art pieces in huge numbers and sell them two or three times a year at York Lanes.

The search for artistic resources uncontaminated by bourgeois markets was partly what led poets like Baudelaire to focus on what was suppressed and antithetical to bourgeois proprieties such as death, decomposition, the sexually bizarre and the negative and suppressed regions of the psyche. It should not be surprising that punk and Goth bands were among the first to rediscover Baudelaire and bring him back into popular culture. When Baudelaire composed *The Flowers of Evil*, psychoanalysis had yet to be invented, but clearly artists were already actively seeking to discover aspects of human and natural life that had been pushed under the surface and that were considered dangerous and decadent to bourgeois sensibilities. The fact that many later analysts have read Baudelaire's poems as explorations of the unconscious illuminates the ways that the arts began the journey interior long before Freud developed his theories.

### *The Modern Self*

It would be impossible to exhaust the many ways that Baudelaire helps to invent (or reflect if you prefer) the modern self. I've just mentioned his initial forays into the individual psyche. But much more fundamental to all of his poems is that, while they contain often graphic descriptions of city life, urban classes, and modern sexuality, the focal point of all of these *realistic* details are the reactions of the observer and the

experiences of the participant. What are real are the *meanings* given to objects and experiences by life's stroller. Thus, even the most smelly, vile, pungent and titillating *facts* are constantly being recalibrated by the *self* as symbols, metaphors and allegories. This capacity for the self to attach symbolic meaning to everything means that the *ultimate reality is in the mind* and the mind is solitary. This is the modern individual clearly, and although Baudelaire believes that individuals have enough in common that they can communicate with one another, what they communicate is anything but shared values. Everyone ultimately is alone.

What do they have in common that they can share? That is an interesting question that can't easily be answered in some absolute sense, but what can be shared certainly are not *memories* because each person's take on events and experiences is so personal, fragmentary and unreproducible, that what we all most have in common is our boredom, our vulnerability, and our dread. This is the modern existential world of the *stranger*, except now everyone is ultimately a stranger to everyone else. Everyone feels alone; no one can trust any relationship. All relationships have a pre-nuptial character to them, even the most intense, as we shall see in a moment.

And paradoxically, everyone is also a potential stranger to themselves. The modern urban individual is, in a sense, free but to quote Kris Kristofferson "freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose" or the Eagles "freedom, well that's just somebody talking; your prison is to walk this world all alone". Don't ever think that poetry, literature and culture don't have real influence. 'Me and Bobby McGee' and 'Desperado' might never have been written without poets like Baudelaire expressing what it is to be modern. The problem is that we moderns have nothing clear to build our *self* upon. We have to keep working at it every day. And the task is like the penance of Sisyphus.

Many of Baudelaire's poems, and a lot of modern literature, are, not surprisingly about memory. The most tangible things that we have to hold on to are memories. But what are memories. They are like data in the Matrix, or the photos that the androids cling to in the movie *Bladerunner*. *Parisian Scenes* is full of shattered memories because the city is changing all around Baudelaire. While change can be exciting, it also gives you no resting place for your identity. We need to make an important distinction between the individual self and a sense of identity. Paradoxically, one's sense of identity works best when involuntary sensory memory (such as the perfume of the first girl you kissed, or your love of a certain chocolate that you had as a kid, or 'soul food') links to voluntary memory (such as the nation, community or ethnic group that you belong to). But what is happening to nations, communities or ethnic groups in the fragmented world of the experience collecting stroller? Is it any wonder that Baudelaire's most important memories are the sunlight on his mother's dining room table or the smell of his favorite nurse? Memories are all that we have to guarantee a self, but in modern life they are so fragmented, that a solid sense of who we are is replaced by nostalgia for our childhood. The modern self is alienated from itself.

### *Love and Sex*

Some of you may be thinking of a path out of this loneliness. The modern path, of course, is love, specifically romantic love. Meaning comes with a relationship that is not just a right of passage but two selves finding themselves, reinforcing themselves and celebrating themselves in each other. It is a nice dream. It may even be a true dream. But Baudelaire doesn't think so. He thinks that modern people delude themselves into thinking that they can find love because people are strangers to one another. And no two kinds of people are more estranged for him than men and women.

If you read some of Baudelaire's many poems about sex, you will discover that he is a misogynist – he hates women. But he's fascinating because he's not a simple misogynist. For him, love is about an intense sexual experience that can never be purely sensory because we symbolize and idealize the experience. But marriage is inconceivable as either a practical relationship or as a platonic ideal because men and women are strangers to one another. In modern life, everyone is a stranger to everyone else; but the gender distinction amplifies the estrangement. Baudelaire was the first person that I know of to suggest that female sexuality is very different from male sexuality and that women are easily bored by male lovemaking. His poems on lesbianism were obviously written in part to shock and titillate his nineteenth-century Catholic readers, but the fact that he thought of entitling *The Flowers of Evil* as *The Lesbians* suggests that he wanted to say something profound. If we are collectors of sensations, if that is what defines us as living as opposed to dying, then we should look for the highest quality sensations. This means that gay relationships are not only acceptable but approved.

Baudelaire would have laughed, to the extent that he was capable of laughing, at those in the gay movement today who want to legitimize gay marriages. For him, in practice as well as theory, marriage was a myth. It was a traditional ideal that made no sense in the modern urban environment. And marriage was immoral because it was part of the satanic techniques and institutions that prevented us from really living and that made our lives a living death of unproductive boredom and lethargy. In a choice between necrophilia and marriage, Baudelaire would certainly have opted for necrophilia. Now, you may not like what Baudelaire had to say, but now nearly 200 years later, marriage is under threat and a heck of a lot of modern men and women are not finding what they need in traditional and long lasting relationships. What is more, the tension between sex and marriage that the sentimentalists and romantics attempted to bridge is becoming more evident all the time.

This is Baudelaire's era, and his discussions of sex, despite all the misogyny, are more relevant now than ever. Even within relationships, everyone is talking about growing, finding stimulation, and being open to sexual stimulation. Even 20 years ago, who would have thought that the Showcase channel would devote Friday nights – traditionally the largest television audience – to kink, g-spot, porno valley etc? What is soooo very interesting about those shows, with perhaps the exception of *Bliss*, is how very, very boring they are. Who would have thought that sex could be so boring? Baudelaire would. For him everything bombarding an over stimulated psyche has the potential for being boring and to push one further into depression. That's why sex needs to constantly be informed by art and the discovery of the ideal. Marriage and traditional morality need

not apply! The Baudelairian message is that, while you can't expect to find happiness either in modern attitudes towards sexuality or traditional marriage, at least you can rise above lethargy and transcend depression in sex. Sexual attraction proves that you are not dead.

### *The Crowd*

Marriage is a traditional relationship that Baudelaire finds untenable in the modern world. In closing it is useful to remind ourselves that the modern world is the world of the stranger and the crowd. This is the quintessential world of intermittent boredom and excitement; sexual titillation and exhaustion, where any mysterious stranger could become a lover and a cast away *one night stand*. And although sex clearly has the advantage of being a powerful emotion, it is also a metaphor for the entire modern experience that excites and depresses – the roller coaster that ends when we die. The point for Baudelaire is to avoid dying while we are living and, if you think that just means getting as much sex as possible before you die, then you've missed his point. Therefore, I want to end by emphasizing what I consider to be the most distinctive feature of *The Flowers of Evil* – its urbanity. Whatever you think about Baudelaire as a poet, the tensions in this work are entirely modern and could only have been conceived in an urban environment where one is free to be solitary but one can always rely on being intoxicated by the crowd. In his private journal, Baudelaire summed it up perfectly by saying “Number is all, and in all. Number is within the individual. Intoxicating number.” What he meant, of course, was the freedom of someone in the crowd. It is the freedom to think for yourself, to be autonomous, and at the same time to feed off the buzz or the energy of the street. It is an entirely new kind of freedom; it liberates creativity enormously; but it also generates a new atmosphere of loneliness, alienation and self-absorption. Once the urban settings reached critical mass in the nineteenth-century, these new forms of freedom, creativity and, it must be said, unhappiness and depression can be said to have become self-sustaining. Not simply for sensitive artists but potentially for everyone. It is no longer possible for communities, even national communities, to dominate culture because urbane values now penetrated everywhere where people could read and be influenced by works like *The Flowers of Evil*.

You can learn more about yourself and modern times by reading a couple of poems from *The Flowers of Evil* than 99.9% of the material on the Internet. Even when you strongly disagree with Baudelaire, you have to agree that he's illuminated the issues and forced you out of your dogmatic slumbers to take a stand. The stand that he wants you to take is *for life* over death and that's why he can call himself a moralist. To be sure, he is the enemy of traditional morality, but for him morality has to be aesthetic and contemporary if it is not to represent the forces of death. He goes so far as to call his moral teaching the School (or Liturgy) of Satan because for him Satan represents the affirmation of life over death, and the preference for a living Hell over a boring heaven. But that's a different story, and you'll have to take my 3<sup>rd</sup> year course to find out how all of that shakes down.

## **Alienation as a Way of Life**

### **A Perspective From the Developing World**

The modern city is clearly a dynamic and exciting place for the stroller to savour new experiences. We have already seen how Baudelaire uses the symbol of the urban stroller and dandy as a metaphor for modern men and women who are free to break the chains of tradition and to shape themselves. But there is a cost for this freedom that Baudelaire never hides from. In order to nourish the capacity of the psyche to independently process and truly relish new experiences, the stroller must be prepared to deal with alienation. It is not what happens externally that is decisive; what is decisive is one's personal *response*. Indeed, for Baudelaire the supremely difficult task of the urban stroller is avoid the satanic temptation towards simply falling into the herd mentality of the crowd or the boredom that results from fending off urban stimuli. The modern individual does not simply go along with the prevailing mode; he or she is on a voyage of self-discovery that ends only with death.

That this is a tall order, you can all easily surmise simply by contemplating what your friends do and what you do when you are lazy and bored. Instead of engaging your freedom, you wander about aimlessly expecting others to make the important decisions for you. Many people, and all of us some of the time, don't want to accept the responsibility for shaping our lives. We simply accept the consumer values or moral platitudes that we have been taught by our parents who are the representatives of our society. We mindlessly pursue pleasure in a world that we pretend to contain black and white values. In other words, we prefer being bovines to feeling alienated. That is exactly the kind of attitude that Baudelaire fought against in his poetry. Baudelaire offered modern men and women choices.

Baudelaire was the product of a modern city and a modern attitude. Even though he didn't like many aspects of modernity, he clearly accepted modernity as a dynamic that necessitated a change in mentality or what the French call *mentalité*. At the same time, he recognized the tensions involved in modernity and the difficulties in adopting the perspective of the stroller. If these tensions were experienced by a person who had lived all of his life in a big city – who in fact had known nothing other than the urban experience – can you imagine how they must strike an intelligent observer who does not come from a big city or a modern society. Today, with globalization, many developing countries are experiencing modernization much more rapidly than Western Europe ever did. The psychological impact of modernization upon developing societies – in terms of hopes and fears, positives and negatives – is much more pronounced. Most of us simply accept the modern world without questioning it, but that's not as easy to do if you are a Third World observer.

'Outsider' literature can be highly revealing in so far as the outsider sees some things more clearly than the insider who takes altogether too much for granted. The literature coming out of the underdeveloped and developing nations today is, in some ways, much

more fascinating than the literature coming out of Europe, because the writers are much more conscious of the ambiguities and tensions associated with modernity. Whether or not they embrace or reject the modern urban world is perhaps less important than the fresh point of view that they bring to the modern enterprise. This is certainly the case with respect to the enormously significant literature that was produced in Russia in the nineteenth-century, particularly by writers who lived or wrote about Russia's most modern city – Petersburg. The city where Dostoyevsky's *underground man* lived, and that helped to make him the kind of nervous mouse that he was, was Petersburg. Now, in order to fully appreciate the perspective of Dostoyevsky and a lot of other Russian writers, you need to know a couple of things about Petersburg. Peter I began building it in 1703 on the swampy ground near the Neva River that's connected to a lake that leads to the Baltic Sea. He intended it as an administrative center and naval base but what's important for us is that Peter the Great imposed Petersburg as an Enlightened, modern, geometrical city on a Russia that was still highly feudal with a Tsar, with a small proportion of aristocrats, dominating 80% of the population who were still peasants or serfs and tied to the land in servitude. The only three jobs available to smart people who wanted to move up in life were as soldiers (and most of the officer jobs went to aristocrats or relatives of aristocrats), clergymen (and most of the higher offices went to younger sons of aristocrats or relatives), and, especially as Petersburg grew as an administrative center – *clerks* or bureaucrats. What's missing from this picture that Europe had – basically a robust and mobile capitalist or middle class.

The chasm between a modern city and a backward society could not have been larger! That chasm became even wider after the French Revolution and during the 1830s as Russian society, instead of progressing economically, moved relatively backward. You've got a modern city but no stable modern mentality. Of course, most people simply accept the situation in which they are placed. The so-called people of *action* that the underground man envies but also scorns don't ever question the status quo. The military men and most of the bureaucrats simply accept the prevailing rules of a hierarchical society plunked down into a modern city while enjoying the perks and excitements of a beautiful urban center with proximity to commercial European society. The perfect example of this dichotomy is a street -- the Nevsky Prospect near the Admiralty Building in Petersburg. It was a crowded street where everyone – aristocrats, servants, labourers, clerks and clergymen – walked. It was a very public street but there was no public society of citizens. Thus the dilemma of the underground man who feels himself to be the intellectual equal of almost everyone, but has to get out of the way of anyone walking down the street that is his social superior. It's a street that sells the very latest fashion, and everyone knows what the best fashions are, for example the finely tailored coats with the superior, not coarse, beaver collar. But hardly anyone can afford those fashions. If a clerk plays the aristocratic network right by sucking up, he might get a higher administrative position and enough cash to play the fashionable ranking game by hiring carriages or purchasing the latest fashion, but promotion won't be based on merit. You might think that our society is one where "it's not what you know but who you know"; but Petersburg was infinitely worse.



If the city was, in a sense, unreal and fantastical, the street was surreal, especially at night when the daytime shops closed down and the fashionable elite and soldiers came out to promenade, seek entertainment, and call upon one another. The phenomena was made even more unsettling to one's sense of what was real and what was unreal by the fact that apart from the main thoroughfares and important buildings, of which there were no less than 35,000, the rest of the city filled in higgly piggly and was far less savoury, prostitution being one of the major unofficial enterprises for the military bachelors who stayed for a while in Petersburg but, like Zverkov, would be promoted and sent off to serve elsewhere. The houses of prostitution were ranked like the rest of the society – hierarchically – with fresh young tradesman's daughters like Liza making the rounds of the fashionable bordellos but, as they got older, becoming prostitutes for pimps in the Haymarket – the seedier area of town where the butcher shops and leather tanning shops were collected together in order to keep the stench in one part of town.

Now, you don't have to be a genius to realize that neither this kind of modernity nor its culture appears 'real' to the traditional Russian mind. It was difficult for Russians to get their minds around this unreal modern world much less to appreciate its possibilities. Their characteristic tendency was to oppose the *realism* of modernity – the language of commerce and progress – with the alternate reality that they were more familiar with – the agrarian language of soil. Instead of viewing capitalists as potential heroes or even as a class to be reckoned with, the group that they favoured as substantial and the heart of society, were usually the peasants. But they only had to look west to realize that an agrarian peasant utopia – whatever that might look like – was not a viable option. The only realistic option was to *confront* modernity, to understand it, to dissect it, and to explore available avenues of salvation from it. There was no dynamic middle class who could be responsible for progress and no developed working class who could steer society in a positive direction. The only middle class that served as exemplars of modernity were the administrative bureaucrats – the *clerks* – who they eyed with suspicion but, and this is crucial, without fear. While Russian writers may have hated and feared modernity in general, they did not fear the most obviously *modern type of individual*. And that fact made all the difference.

Sometimes context is everything. In the case of Russian, the context was not determinative or Russian writers would be of little relevance for us today. What do I mean by this? First, Russian writers felt forced to confront modernity as an attitude more than simply or primarily as economic capitalism, since modernity had been foisted upon them in the absence of a dynamic middle class. This led Russian writers to emphasize the ethic of rationalistic calculation without which capitalism could never have developed and Petersburg would never have been built. Second, in the absence of economic progress, Russian writers were much more intrigued by the psychological state of modern men and women than by a material progress they had not witnessed. That psychological state, of course, was much more unstable and alienating for the Russians than it was for someone like Baudelaire, who embraced modernity more fully. Alienation was a negative, and ultimately, nihilistic mode of being that one needed to escape from. Third, because Russian writers had no dynamic middle class, no *capitalistic captains of industry*, their only archetype of modernity was the clerk or educated lesser bureaucrat.

But universalizing the unhappy and frustrated clerk as the everyman of modernity ended up being a fortuitous stroke of brilliance. Why? Because ultimately capitalism isn't about the freeing up of individual talent as much as it is about a bureaucratic division of labour that separates us from others as well as from ourselves. While not many of us have the realistic prospect of becoming a Bill Gates, being modern means trying to construct and maintain a meaningful self in a world where intelligence can no longer discover meaning. Every modern person has to go *within*; everyone has to take the path interior, everyone has to discover who he or she is. Going within, or going *underground* if you prefer, is difficult enough if you have a social position or reasonable prospects of achievement, but what if, like most Russian clerks in the nineteenth-century, there is no capitalist world to provide you with a realistic opportunity. Then the 'real world' outside and the 'real world' within your psyche result in a peculiar psychological condition combining resentment with paralysis, hyperactivity with depression, and increasingly profound alienation. The underground man is, as he says at the end of the novella, an "extreme" and "unhealthy" case of self-loathing. But, as he suggests, aren't many of his anxieties shared to some degree by every modern person? And the critique that he has of modernity is that the balancing act that it asks of everyone is oppressive. We can never be sure "what to join to, what to cling to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise" if we take the journey into our own hearts and minds seriously.

Those pessimistic Russian authors engaged in a new kind of critique of modernity, shining a searchlight on the problematic relationship between the development of society and the development of the self. They did this by illuminating the psychological dilemma that the hegemony of development poses, that intelligent development could make less extreme, but that can never be resolved once put into play. No one, arguably not even Freud, has made as great a contribution to understanding the modern psyche than Dostoyevsky. Equally important, Dostoyevsky and his Russian contemporaries offered a much richer and more complex understanding of the problems of modernity than was forthcoming from Western Europe where economic and individual progress were intertwined. Partly thanks to those Russian writers, the literary writers of today's Third World are in a much better position highlight the dangers of an uncritical embrace of development. Put simply, development is not a panacea for the problems we associate with the human condition and it negates many of the human meanings that communities have discovered over time.

### **The Desire for Equality**

Modernity is threatening but it also has a very positive meaning that is too often ignored by the enemies of development – the belief in the equality of both men and women. Although most discussions of *Notes from the Underground* don't pay much attention to this theme, Dostoyevsky obviously considered it worthy of attention. The first section of Book II explores the desire for equality in a fascinating example. The underground clerk, one of those new kinds of intellectual types that even had a name – *raznochintsy* – represented an entirely new type in Russia. These were people who were not members of the landed aristocracy or the gentry but people who had administrative jobs in Petersburg because they were educated on the European model. Having imbibed western ideas of

equality, these “men of various origins and classes” might think of themselves as equals to anyone and mentally as superior. Yet, they were functionaries in a highly stratified society and, in an important sense, did not count. For Dostoyevsky, the social problem can always be reduced to a mental problem. These underground men did not count even in their own minds.

We have this perfect description of the underground man strolling the Nevsky Prospect near the admiralty and desperately wanting to be someone, anyone rather than someone who didn't count. He wasn't even important enough in that status oriented society to be worthy of being thrown out of a tavern. In order to feel like a man, at night he wanders into the seedy districts of Petersburg and the suggestion is that he frequents houses of prostitution. Eventually his resentment focuses on a military officer, a ubiquitous character in an administrative center that doubled as a military center. Officers typically came from aristocratic families and had rank. This particular officer picks underground man up by the shoulders and simply moved him out of the way. The same thing happened to me at a rugby game in Scotland once and I can tell you that it is a humiliating experience.

Underground man wants equality and needs a symbol of equality. Dostoyevsky wants us to think of him as a bit petty and full of resentment, but we can be much more generous in our postcolonial age and view underground man as standing up for his rights in the only ways possible. He attempts to get acceptance *in his own mind* by dressing fashionably (replacing his raccoon with a beaver collar) and staging a confrontation with the officer. It takes him literally forever because he can't overcome his own insecurities but, eventually, through a combination of luck and persistence, he manages to bump into the officer. He gets the worst of the bump because the officer is bigger than he is, but *he stood up for himself*. Moreover, he gained an important realization from this experience. Whereas he felt like an *eel* avoiding bumping into social superiors on the sidewalk, he noticed that the officer too “wriggled like an eel” in order to avoid bumping into generals and high-ranking persons.

If Dostoyevsky wanted us to think of underground man as a pathetic joke, and it is not clear that he did, he does not appear at all puny to those of us living in multicultural Toronto, where cultural groups and genders recently had to engage in struggles for recognition. We would probably tend to think – “good for you” for standing up for yourself and making a point if only to yourself. And we can celebrate with him the new kind of feeling of acceptance of self and others that came of his efforts. Underground man was never happier than when he made his stand. He was “delighted”; he sang “Italian arias”; he was somebody. As for the officer, he was posted somewhere and underground man hadn't seen him for 14 years. His resentment had totally vanished and underground man could even refer to the officer as “the good fellow”. Three days later, of course, everything changed. Underground man, no longer satisfied with a life-affirming exhibition of external equality, began to indulge a diseased subjectivity. His exploration of underground man's subjectivity showed Dostoyevsky to be the new literary master of modernity.

## Exploring Subjectivity

*Notes from the Underground* is an anti-development or anti-modern critique. But it is much more than that. It is one of the most modern works written in the nineteenth-century and one that anticipates the essentially private literature of the later European writers. While modernity remained heir to the Enlightenment tradition of objectivity and optimistic realism, literature had relatively few options. It could realistically *describe* the mode of living and the manners of human beings; it could *moralize* about what that mode and manners ought to be; or it could *escape* from reality into fantasy. Fantasy would seem to have offered greater possibilities for the exercise of the creative imagination, but the problem was precisely that it was an escape from the tensions of modernity. A typical case in point was the Gothic novel that retreated into the world of medieval castles and superstitions and that gave a thrill without having much contemporary relevance. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was vastly superior to most Gothic works but its literary possibilities were hampered by all of its moralizing about science and society. Victor and the Monster are interesting as symbols and types, but hardly believable as complex modern characters.

Dostoyevsky puts us on a more recognizably modern path by exploring a new subjective reality with a much greater scope for realistic and technical innovation. For the novelist, the private world of the individual offered an uncharted domain. In order to explore the domain of consciousness to any considerable extent, the author had to abandon any traditional role as the narrator of *objective facts*. The critical issue for the modern writer centers on the imperative of realistic characterization. Regardless or not of whether an objective reality exists, realistic modern characters can only be developed fully if the writer takes the *road interior*. The novel was developed and refined as the pre-eminent vehicle for exploring the individual self in all its subjectivity. Previously the individual was presumed to be a rational actor in a mechanical universe governed by the laws of cause and effect. Human nature and nature were linked in a progressive movement towards a rational and humane society. When human reason and modernity were called into question after the 1850s, the imaginative writer could not easily turn back the literary clock. The individual and the *self* now became the focal point of imaginative literature. Giving a choice between giving up the individual and exploring the subjective reality of the self, most writers opted for the latter. In the process, they affirmed the cultural hegemony of the self (possibly the divided, confused or deluded *self*), ironically in a world where the independent thinking individual was becoming something of an anachronism. In a world dominated by such powerful economic forces as the state, political parties, economic classes, professional organizations, warring ethical theories and incompatible philosophies, literature went in the opposite direction. It went inside the modern mind.

*Notes from the Underground* begins and ends with subjectivity. External events, the 'real life' that he craves, are at best triggers for internal emotions. "I AM A SICK MAN" is the opening statement. There is an objective context in so far as he 'believes' that his liver is diseased. But the objective context is immediately taken away for two reasons: 1) his liver may not be diseased, and 2) if it is, he doesn't want a cure. You might think that

the underground man is a highly depressed and unstable weirdo who needs to get out more. What you'd be ignoring is that all modern people live in their own minds – in the underground – and external objective reality becomes less and less real to us as we explore ourselves. In fact, modern people are obsessed with themselves and their emotions aren't they? They think about themselves all the time. They are constantly trying to discover, define and explain themselves. Many of them suffer from a largely self-inflicted depression, don't they?

Getting out more might be a solution. After all the underground man – the man who lives in his head too much – seems terribly anxious, irritable and neurotic to others. Liza describes him as “unhappy”. Rational individuals are supposed to seek happiness aren't they? What's the attraction of so morbidly delving into the subjective interior? You'd miss the entire point of *Notes from the Underground* if you said that he needs to get out more. You'd miss the intense pleasure that the underground man gets from thinking and talking about himself. You'd also miss out on the reason why so many modern people can't seem to crawl out of their depression without medication. It's because the internal world is so much more fascinating than the external world. It's because the internal world is so much more primary than the external world. It's because the internal world is the domain of the most creative and intelligent insights. The underground man may be only marginally less comfortable in his own skin than with his relationships with others, but even his irritability is a fascinating realm to explore. The outside world is boring and stupid and insipid in comparison to what goes on in his mind.

Many of you have swallowed the utilitarian line that what people seek is happiness or the romantic line that what people seek is love, but the underground man knows better than that because he knows himself much more subtly than you or I know ourselves. The architects of modern society, and by implication the modern city, believe that you can maximize happiness, eliminate hate, and promote love. Those are all attempts by *reason* to improve the world. Petersburg – “the most theoretical and intentional town on the whole terrestrial globe” – is a perfect example of the attempt to impose order on chaos. All such attempts to construct “crystal palaces” for the mind are doomed says the underground man, because human consciousness is anything but rational. A little introspection into yourself shows that many of your desires are irrational. The underground man knows that he is SICK, even “acutely” diseased, but he wants to suggest that everyone is sick and that “consciousness is a disease”. At least the underground man is honest with himself. He knows that he is egotistical, spiteful, a lover of domination, but, paradoxically, also a masochist who wants to be dominated. His capacity for loathing everyone and everything is only matched by his self-loathing.

Now you might think that there can be no pleasure in self-loathing, but you would be confusing objective happiness with subjective pleasure. There is, as the underground man knows, a subjective pleasure in self-loathing. Self-loathing as a psychological state is perhaps the most egotistical activity that one can engage in. It makes oneself the all-important focus of one's attention. It is the most complete form of self-absorption possible. Hating oneself is as close to removing oneself from external judgment as one could get – the opinions of others simply do not count. Or at least they count only to the

extent that they stimulate ever-greater internal discoveries. Brooding on every imagined insult or slight is a very effective technique for self-exploration. It is absolutely not a good strategy for dealing with the external world, but then the external world is a bore in comparison with the internal world. And boredom, as Baudelaire suggested, is the only real hell for the underground man.

For the underground man, only his own feelings are real, and as long as he has those feelings, especially the more pungent negative feelings, he is aware that he is alive and kicking. As his expertise and sophistication in dissecting himself increases, he loses much of his ability to function in the external world. He constantly speaks of paralysis, which, not incidentally, is something that many modern day depressives complain of. But what helps to compensate for his inability to perform adequately in the external world is the sense of his own internal superiority. What does his subjective reality reveal to him that makes him superior *in his own mind*? A number of things. First, it reveals to him that it is a huge mistake to try to change the world, since we can't even change ourselves. Second, even if we could create a perfect world – a crystal palace – we would stick our tongues out at it because we don't want happiness. Third, genuine relationships with other people are impossible, because we can't fully trust our motives from moment to moment, much less anyone else! Fourth, all the ideas that we have about the world and relationships are so much nonsense – it's what we've been taught or notions that we've gotten from books and have nothing to do with consciousness. Fifth, the people who believe in these ideas are either stupid like Simonov and his buddies or hopelessly naïve like Liza.

Every time the underground man enters into communications/relationships with the external world, he discovers how much more intelligent he is than everyone else. To be sure, he occasionally desires an emotional connection with others, but only on his own terms and only if the superiority of his consciousness – his sensitive self -- over that of other people is recognized. Not only would such relationships appear to be highly unrealistic or unstable, but also they would be more reinforcements for the building up of the internal self. If you read *Notes from the Underground* really carefully, and don't fall into the trap of viewing the underground man as either a sympathetic loser or an asshole, you see that others view him as intelligent and that he has had chances for relationships. What is so quintessentially modern about him, and you can probably find parallels among people you know, is how he *sabotages* those opportunities. The sabotaging may be conscious in the case of the underground man or subconscious with respect to people you know, but what is going on in both cases is protecting the self at all costs and providing new stimuli for discovering and exploring that self. That's modern. People in the past didn't have the same *selves* to discover and protect.

### **The Advantages of Self-Sabotage**

Not needing to protect oneself implies the unquestioning embrace of normalcy. But the intensely conscious individual needs to always question that *normal* in order to discover his or her unique self. Confronting or being confronted by the normal may be painful, but it forces one back upon the self as the ideal mechanism for interpreting what is happening. Alienation from the normal is not simply about disliking or opposing what is normal; it is now a resource for pushing further into one's interior.

Modernity, as we've seen, can mean more than one thing. It can mean striving for progress and dealing with change objectively. And it can mean exploring the modern experience subjectively. The two attitudes rarely run together; the committed scientist and the alienated artist are often opposite types; one's perspective on modernity depends largely upon whether one takes an objective-rational approach or an emotive-subjective approach. But Dostoyevsky's underground man illuminates the allure of the subjective approach in a modern bureaucratic scientific world of rational cities, mathematical formulas, and today we might add genetic determinacy. The underground man views objective rationality as something that negates his humanity. Rationality once defined man as distinct and superior to non-human nature and underlined his freedom. Modern science and mathematical calculation, on the other hand, have given reason the power to control men and women. When the underground man says that he wants  $2 + 2 = 5$ , he is being irrational. But what he seeks is to restore his free will in an over rationalized world. Subjective reality is by definition non-rational and is a wide canvas for artistic creation in a scientific world. Hence its appeal for the artist; hence why all artists must, to some extent be alienated underground men and women.

### **The Modern Anti-Hero**

We have met the anti-hero before in Baudelaire's poems, especially when the poet elevates those who reject bourgeois values by choice or situation. The sensitive artistic temperament attempts to discover other models of humanity in the modern age than the capitalist captain of industry or the scientist. Baudelaire, like most artists and often hypocritically, want to set themselves up as kinds of anti-heroes who reject the impoverished objectivity of modernity. *Notes from the Underground*, however, is quite distinctive. While some eighteenth-century novels like *Tristram Shandy* can be said to have made anti-heroes the central characters, not until Dostoyevsky do we see exhibited anti-heroes whose heroism is defined entirely by their consciousness rather than their actions. What is even more fascinating about this entirely new kind of anti-hero than their relative inactivity is their ambiguous, paradoxical and divided *character*. As western literature developed, it increasingly shifted the focus from the action or the story of the piece to characterization. The characters may have grown more complex from Shakespeare on, but they were always fairly well defined. In fact, Shakespeare is regarded as a writer who was able to present complex characters that were also *consistent*.

The modern anti-hero, whether it is the cynical, self-absorbed and self-loathing underground man, or a more potentially positive role model, is defined by his or her fluidity of character. Character is no longer consistent. The underground man is only a recognizable character to the extent that he “representative of a generation” that cannot achieve permanency or consistency if it is to be viable. The irony of the modern search for the self, and the dilemma of the modern anti-hero, is that is a journey of self-discovery that provides insight but never culminates in anything that we could call a distinctive self. If there is anything distinctive about this journey, it is that there is no final destination but death. What connects Dostoyevsky and Baudelaire’s anti-heroes is that there is no home that could ever contain a defined person. Personality depends on a home or a destination that one could arrive at. Baudelaire’s Paris and Dostoyevsky’s Petersburg are important urban environments but the closest thing to home is the mind. And the mind, of course, is divided into fragments within an emotional whirlwind of desires that can never be fulfilled. The underground man says:

I am told that the Petersburg climate is bad for me, and that with my small means it is very expensive to live in Petersburg. I know all that better than all these sage and experienced counselors and monitors...But I am remaining in Petersburg; I am not going away from Petersburg! I am not going away because...ech! Why, it is absolutely no matter whether I am going away or not going away.

Make no mistake about it, Dostoyevsky doesn’t like this underground man. But his portrayal is as insightful as it is brilliant or complex; the superiority of the modern anti-hero depends entirely upon his appreciation of the ambiguity of modern life. Similarly, his courage is defined in terms of his unwillingness to retreat into mindlessness, formulas or the herd mentality.

Some students have told me that they find the underground man lazy or at least lethargic. The underground man might sometimes say that about himself as well. But you have to appreciate the fact that this kind of behaviour can only be described as lethargic if you discount what is going on in his mind. Moreover, you’d be lethargic too if you believed that modern life calls into question the very notion of meaningful behaviour. Modern scientists were eradicating religion and free will. Modern armies were rendering concepts of improvement, humanity and peace nugatory by systematizing slaughter. The inhabitants of the most “theoretical and intentional town” on the globe were not interested in democracy and freedom but who had higher status, connections or the latest fashion. Being an intelligent observer of modern society means having to temper one’s rationalistic and romantic dreams; and being an intelligent observer of one’s own motives makes it increasingly difficult to act.

The heroes of modernity, of course, are the people who act. They are the senior administrators, military officers and successful university graduates that the underground man runs into. It is interesting that they have names and distinctive personalities. They are quite predictable. The underground man describes in his imagination even how they would beat him up:



Trudolyubov will beat me hardest, he is so strong; Ferfitchkin will be sure to catch old sideways and tug at my hair. But no matter, no matter! That's what I am going for.

The underground man's dilemma is that he has the psychological insight and creative imagination to explore multiple personalities without ever being able to adopt any of them. That he is quite capable of assuming personality traits, he demonstrates in his sentimental sermon to Liza. But he knows that these are ultimately all meaningless postures and that there are no definitive meanings to which one can cling.

Dostoyevsky doesn't like the underground man, as I said. That's because he thinks there is a religious solution to the problem of life that is infused with a Russian orthodox Christian love and willingness to forgive. But what if the underground man is right and there is no solution and personality is just a mirage? The underground man thinks of himself as a new kind of hero – an anti-hero – because he has the courage (not in all situations and at all times because he knows that he can never be consistent) to accept *his* modern condition as perpetual detachment from any hope of a real life and a real home, on earth or in heaven. The limiting thing about action heroes, and mankind's uncritical worshipping of their success, is that they typically lack the depth and complexity that we associate with modern life. You either love 'em or hate 'em. The anti-hero is someone who embodies modern ambiguity, and who weaknesses we might dislike, but to some extent we share.

We appreciate anti-heroes much more today than in the past. It is difficult to think of modern literary protagonists who are not in some sense flawed. It is the pastime of modern journalism, when it isn't worshipping celebrity, to unmask the indiscretions and egocentricity of the rich and famous. While we like to embrace Hollywood heroes, serious literature and serious movies give us more flawed everymen and everywoman. Those are the kinds of people that we can identify with. We have to decide on balance whether we approve a character or not, but we can no longer overlook the ambiguity in all of our actions and the mixed nature of our motives. I suspect that many adolescents will approve of the underground man, if only because they share many of his anxieties. I certainly did when I first read this book. Now that I am older, I tend to see the underground man more as an egotistical person with little tolerance for the people he hurts. But I still find it hard to condemn him completely because, unlike some of the self-worshippers I run into, he is willing to admit and apologize for what he is. If occasionally he shows bad-faith and irresponsibility, he is deeply "ashamed" that he can't seem to do better.

### **Fragmented Lives and Memories**

If, from the perspective of subjectivity, modern life is not a pilgrimage of a distinct somebody to a distinct somewhere, what is it and how can it best be described? In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoyevsky begins to map out a new terrain for novelists that has been called *psychological realism*. Now, you no longer need to have a plot and you

no longer need to have heroes or heroines initiating the action. Instead, you have protagonists whose inner selves are explored in moments or episodes or, the famous postmodern term, *fragments*. Modern life consists of fragmented experiences that we process in terms of significance for us. The most revealing insights into modern consciousness come, not from describing or narrating the hero's story, but by following a train of thought wherever it goes and whatever the consequences.

Dostoyevsky shows us exactly what it means to find meaning in fragments. After allowing the underground man to undermine any expectations of a familiar storyline, he offers us a highly significant episode that the underground man could not shake off. There are a number of things that are revealing about modern writing in *À Propos of Wet Snow*. The first is that it describes a series of events that happened over a few days. The second is that the events themselves are not significant; nor is the impact that those events had on the underground man what is really important; what is important is the way that these events reveal the tortured and divided mind of a certain kind of modern man. The third is that the only thing that counts as reality is the private world of the protagonist. While there are taverns, soldiers, prostitutes, shops and all the other features of real urban life, what is important is the dialogue between the protagonist and the reader. Even the narrator disappears.

The protagonist asks the reader a peculiar kind of question. The question obviously isn't do you approve or disapprove of me; although the underground man is sufficiently human that part of him would like to be liked. The question is much more interesting: *can you understand me*. If you understand him, if you see fragments of yourself in him, then his life has meaning for you. This kind of intense dialogue can only consist of fragments within fragments. Were the underground man to tell you his life story, you would not have an understanding of him. The narration of a life story imposes an artificial structure on experience because certain aspects will need to be foregrounded and others relegated to the background. Obviously, the requirements of a life story don't permit much space for exploring the mental processes involved in consciousness. A fragment, a moment or an episode, allows the modern reader to engage in the thought processes of the protagonist. But that's not the only reason why a great deal of modern writing deploys this technique. Narrating a story, or elaborating a plot, misses the entire point of the way consciousness works. Consciousness singles out and retains in memory particular fragments as having significance or meaning. It does not typically organize itself for itself as a plot or a story.

I am aware that there is an enormous emphasis on narration as a technique and strategy today, particularly for those whose stories have been obscured by patriarchy (women's experience) or colonialism (the experience of the colonized). This kind of remedial storytelling is important because other stories, other narrations, have prevailed. What I would suggest, however, is that while this kind of storytelling may be necessary, it is not cutting edge modern. The entire thrust of literary modernity is to move away from the more traditional forms of narration that generate meanings for groups in order to explore the individual psyche. I'm not saying one form of writing is necessarily truer or better

than the other, but I am suggesting that narration doesn't speak to the most creative forms of modern literature where the emphasis decidedly leans towards the fragment.

*À Propos of Wet Snow* is the underground man's attempt to come to grips with what he calls the real world of society and relationships. The potential society is his former schoolmates and the potential relationship is with the prostitute Liza. The reason that this foray into external reality is significant for the underground man is because it is decisive. What he discovers is that he cannot function in external reality and his fate is confirmed as an underground man. The fact of failure is not in itself crucial, because many modern people superficially function in jobs, society and relationships while having an underground consciousness. In fact it is entirely possible that a few of your university professors will be underground men and women at heart masquerading as professionals. The underground man is only distinctive to the extent that he is extreme about it and actively drives people away rather than driving them crazy.

The brief episode, where the underground man ends up in the prostitute's arms, ostensibly because he's effectively deserted by the schoolmates that he wants to torture with his superiority, tells you more about his internal conflicts than any socio-economic analysis of his upbringing ever could. Unlike objective modern accounts that might excuse his behaviour on the basis of losing his parents, being rejected at school, and being passed over for less intelligent administrators – all factors that are included in the work – the underground man affirms his free will in knowing and choosing his fate. You'd be surprised how many authors want to fit *Notes from the Underground* into the socio-economic environment of Russia in the mid-nineteenth century, and even to view the Russian Revolution as the revenge of the oppressed clerks of Petersburg. While the underdeveloped status of Russia might explain some of the preoccupations and emphases of Russian writers, however, they cannot account entirely for the kind of psychological realism that provides Dostoyevsky with new insights into the nature of modernity and the nature of memory.

We can all recollect times that we've shot ourselves in the foot with members of the opposite sex, and some of us have even had high school reunions that were not that much different than underground man's debacle with his old school mates. But we likely haven't processed the meaning of those events to anywhere near the extent that underground man has, because we don't think that much about the nature of modernity. We might like to mentally revisit shameful episodes in order to get them right, but would we ever contemplate the meaninglessness of relationships or accept unhappiness as a fact of life? Modern writers use the techniques of the fragment to reveal the serious questions that we avoid. They shine a light on significant fragments of memory to make it reveal how fragile and lonely modern life can be.

Modern writers like Dostoyevsky and Proust didn't only try to portray the fragmentation of modern life, but explored the ways these memories became imprinted in memory. Obviously, the episode with former schoolmates and with Liza was emotionally charged, and more important to the underground man than any socio-economic changes that might highlight the historical calendar. Even if the crystal palace, the perfect society, were

built, argued underground man, it would be these highly personal experiences that would count for the individual. The greatest fear of an urban paradise for underground man is that it might attempt to eradicate the fragments of the mind that alone make us what we are. The highly ambiguous fragments that give our lives their limited meaning are as fleeting as the wet snow that falls in Petersburg and shrouds our life for a time. But they are all that we have. What matters for most people are these personal fragments or snapshots, suggests Dostoyevsky, not dangerous abstractions like social reform or revolution. The real battleground is the mind. The mind has its own way of deciding what is significant and what isn't. The imagination has its own way of processing, aided sometimes by something as innocuous as the falling of wet snow. Whenever that wet snow falls, you can bet that the underground man will remember what he has gained and what he has lost by his choices. In the end, underground man chooses his own limited but 'exhausted pleasure' over what he calls the 'cheap happiness' of the herd/crowd. By dialoguing with him, we get insight into our own choices.

### **Dostoyevsky's Criticisms of Underground Man**

I've suggested that Dostoyevsky doesn't like underground man but that he presents this kind of modern character in all his complexity and allows you to see the everyman and everywoman in his psyche. It might be a good time to say what it is that Dostoyevsky is saying and to expose the moralist lurking behind the analyst of modern consciousness. And, remember, for Dostoyevsky everyone is responsible for their own consciousness and no one is off the hook because of ill treatment from others. Dostoyevsky is not kidding, in fact he's dead serious, when he suggests that the only thing that counts are the choices you make in your head.

The first thing that Dostoyevsky doesn't like about underground man is his unrelenting morbidity. Underground man takes himself too seriously; his inability to laugh at life and himself makes him a pain in the ass for others.

The second thing that Dostoyevsky condemns about underground man is his inordinate spite and resentment towards others. He constantly broods over perceived slights and humiliations.

The third thing that Dostoyevsky thinks about underground man is that his occasional *romanticism* is merely a cloak to mask his self-obsession and social ineptness. His real motives are anything but love for mankind or anyone for that matter.

The fourth thing that concerns Dostoyevsky about underground man is his increasing incapacity for forgiveness for those same slights and injuries. He was eventually able to forgive the officer, to be sure, but the capacity forgiveness decreases as one rejects any contact with 'real life'.

The fifth **and perhaps the most important** thing that Dostoyevsky condemns in underground man is his conceit about the superiority of his own intelligence. He has positive contempt for others who he regards as his intellectual inferiors. He uses his

education as a weapon to elevate himself above others. Universal or extensive education for Dostoyevsky was potentially dangerous and could lead to anarchy.

The sixth thing that Dostoyevsky fears about underground man is his willingness to follow his consciousness wherever it might lead. Unlimited freedom can only lead to *nihilism* or the destruction of all values.

The seventh thing that Dostoyevsky dislikes about underground man is that he can only use his intelligence negatively to dissect, criticize and mock.

The eighth thing that Dostoyevsky dislikes about underground man is the ease with which he detaches himself from his social and humane emotions in order to concentrate on those emotions that pertain to himself.

The ninth thing that Dostoyevsky laments about underground man is that he doesn't even respect his own hardship and suffering. It is lot of humanity to suffer, but underground man is addicted to suffering and regards his own irritability as the most vital component in life. Underground man makes a self-conscious *choice* to project suffering inward selfishly inward rather than generously outward.

This brings up the importance of genuine compassion rather than literary sentiment. The tenth thing, therefore, that Dostoyevsky wants to point out about underground man is that he doesn't care about the suffering of others, or their weakness with respect to him. His dealings with Appollon for example show a total lack of generosity or compassion.

The eleventh thing that Dostoyevsky suggests about underground man is that he is a role player rather than a real person. The intelligent normal person will see right through them and, like Simonov, and avoid getting involved in an exchange.

The twelfth and most sinister thing that Dostoyevsky suspects about underground man is that, given the power that he seems to crave, the clerks will be the ones to build the *crystal palace* and establish their standards and values as *the* social standard. Underground men and women fear the crystal palace most because they themselves are really 'tyrants' at heart.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The underground man is "completely a product of the brain". For Dostoyevsky, he's ultimately a highly unstable and even despicable character. Dostoyevsky was highly critical of the modern self and its freedom. But whether we like it or not, there is a bit of underground man in all of us today and especially those who get an education or money and think that they are better than everyone else. The problem that modern men and women face is that the modern age is one that lacks moral meaning, clear rules, and dignified roles. It takes away traditional meanings and forces us to discover meanings for ourselves. Navigating so-called "real life" no longer comes *naturally* but requires remarkable effort because most of us no longer know who we are and we have less

control over what we do. The underground man carries to an extreme what is felt and thought by most people at least some of the time. In some ways, being human has become a heavier burden than it once was.

D believed that love could redeem modern man by allowing the self to embrace the 'other' and that Christianity was a religion of love that helped to connect intersubjective beings. But that's a topic for next week's lecture.

## The Iron Cage

### *Fin De Siècle*

In this course, we have been discussing what it means to be modern. Modern, of course, means different things to different people and different times. But, for the sake of finding a beginning, let's assume that modernity begins when the scientific revolution of the seventeenth-century met the Enlightenment of the eighteenth-century, and educated men and women began to *dream* different dreams than they had previously. The new dreams tended to recast the past as a dark nightmare and to envision a brighter future. Whereas the past was fixed on death and the only faith and hope that counted was in a religion that could remove us from the valley of tears, the future was illuminated (another word for enlightened) by reason and had a new faith in material progress. The world of sin and punishment was replaced by the goodness of human nature and the potential of a heaven upon earth. The modern vision was highly secular, for sure, but many people then as now sought to have it both ways – a happy life on earth followed by an even happier existence in heaven. Still, the world of death, sin, and heaven was relegated to the background while material reality occupied the minds of men.

A funny thing happened on the road to *utopia* (heaven on earth), however. Some Europeans and North Americans, certainly, got used to modern life and limited their emotional connection to the past to forms of nostalgia that could be easily dispelled by the production of wealth and consumer goods that made life more comfortable. The transition was not as smooth, however, in countries like Germany and Russia where the confrontations with modernity were more widespread. Moreover, many intellectuals and artists from the romantics on condemned one or more aspect of modernity, ironically establishing a critical dialectic, where modern art and modern thought diverged from the rosy picture that began in the Enlightenment and that characterized those scientific, technological and philosophical that proceeded under the banner of *positivism*. Many intellectuals adopted more negative and even nihilistic interpretations of modernity, without, it must be said, being able to offer much in the way of a concrete alternative. Many intellectuals and artists made a living as critics of modernity.

The mood of cultural *disenchantment* with modernity greatly intensified between 1870 and 1914 (World War I) for a number of reasons. This period, often referred to as the *Fin the siècle* or end of the century, witnessed an opposition to rational materialism and its cultural twin –realism – on a number of fronts. Western consciousness underwent a transformation in a very short period of time that is as profound as any in the history of culture. Ironically, just at the time when imperialist Europe was forcing its capitalistic and cultural values down the throats of an increasingly global community, it caught a bad case of self-doubt. You might well ask why all of this bitterness or at least sadness with modernity happened just at this time.

Historians can point to all kinds of events in the socio-economic and political environment to explain this loss of confidence. A significant depression in the 1870s

made the now dominant middle class far less sure of themselves. The increasing tensions between workers and capitalists showed that economic progress in the future was not necessary going to be smooth sailing. Not all countries, and particularly not Germany or Russia, bought into liberal values, and Bismarck's social reforms struck at the very heart of market philosophy. The advance of nation states, thought by many to be the ideal instrument of reason and realism (*raison d'état* and *realpolitik*) suggested the possibility of war rather than peace between these mighty individuals. And nationalist *cum* regionalist aspirations, particularly in Spain (the Basques) and Great Britain (the Irish) might now be espoused by any group within the larger community, making freedom and citizenship double-edged swords. The increasingly urbanized life of the big cities, once thought to be so very progressive and exciting, was now condemned by many in the middle class as too anonymous, impersonal and even criminal. The enthusiastic fight for freedom had settled into a sordid squabble over political spoils that was characterized, not by real liberation or a commitment to equality, as by "shuffling and reshuffling political coalitions".

All of these conditions, and many more, undoubtedly contribute to the general *fin de siècle* mood of despondency. But what is more fascinating about the malaise is that it was primarily an intellectual and cultural movement that reflected the belief that Western consciousness was deeply diseased. The starting point for any discussion of this disease was science. Paradoxically, it was the discoveries of highly rationalistic scientists that began in the 1860s and 1870s, which, when translated into social thought generally, made civilized Westerners lose much of their former hubris.

### Science and Progress

The triumph of Western civilization, along with its ethic of rationalism and attention to realism, privileged scientific understanding in ways with which we are still familiar. The scientific understanding of the world – sometimes loosely referred to as *positivism* – dominated social thought and contributed to a new phase of industrialization based on the combination of machinery and scientific *systems* that were brought together in the new *plants* or factories. The *plant* eclipsed the old factory because it totally integrated man and machine in the service of production. The contribution of applied science to economic growth between 1850 and 1900 further consolidated science's hegemony over culture at both the elite and popular levels. Despite all the attempts by romanticism to overturn the scientific view of the world (i.e. illustrated in *Frankenstein*), the scientist emerged as the leading candidate for *hero* in the modern world. Many in the *intelligenza*, and the vast majority of people generally, bought into this image uncritically.

As the ideal type of the rational and realistic individual of the modern age, scientists now had an unfettered license to search for truth using both deductive and inductive reasoning. Mary Shelly criticized this power, without any accompanying social responsibility, in her novel *Frankenstein*. Students often confuse Dr. Frankenstein with the monster that he created. But, in a deeper sense, they are right. Dr. Frankenstein, the scientist, was the *real* monster because he was willing to go to any lengths to prove his Godlike status as



the modern Prometheus. Faith in the powers of natural science, and the relative autonomy of the scientists, reached unprecedented levels in the half-century preceding the First World War. By 1870, science had become so *popular* that new scientific findings were routinely, if sometimes clumsily, incorporated into culture. Older intellectual traditions like linguistics and philosophy, and newer intellectual disciplines, like sociology, sought to mimic the approach and share the *scientific* mantle.

Within the scientific community, paradoxically, important *discoveries* were being made that challenged the optimistic synthesis of reason and reality. For scientists were beginning to discover that nature and human nature were not the rationally ordered entities that everyone took them to be. Moreover some scientists, sociologists, and political scientists were beginning to question the inevitability of progress in the natural and human domain. Up until the 1860s and 1870s, the Newtonian view of nature as an orderly, harmonious and predictable machine held sway. By 1914, most of the best science described the universe as random, chaotic and relative. Even the most basic principles of rational scientific investigation – cause and effect – had been exploded.

Some of these views of a chaotic universe had a hard time penetrating the popular consciousness of science and could not have resulted in a cultural reaction against positivism. But the discussion of human nature in Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) represented a totally different view of progress than the one that had dominated since the Age of Enlightenment. In one sense, *evolutionary* thinking was really nothing new. Without some conception of evolution, the scientific notion of *progress* could never have taken off. It was the nature of evolutionary progress, as described in the new biological science that threw a monkey-wrench (if you will pardon the pun) into a formerly optimistic Western culture.

First and foremost, Darwin argued that species were forever changing to adapt to their environment. Change occurred when individuals in a species developed distinctive characteristics (Darwin didn't say how, but he did suggest why.) that they passed on to their offspring. If these changes were adaptive to the environment – if they helped a species to survive – they were maintained and spread in the population. If the changes were sufficiently significant, they could lead to the development of an entirely new species. *Homo sapiens* was just such a species that had evolved distinctively from other primates. Apart from the fact that humans were highly successful in adapting to and controlling their environment, there was nothing particularly unique about them. Humans were simply a successful species, and even that success was not guaranteed indefinitely. Darwin, therefore, dethroned humanity from its special place in nature. He also brought into question the entire issue of free will because human characteristics were *selected by nature* and were not independent of that nature. It is one thing to secularize human dreams, it is quite another to make them subject to biology. There is nothing particularly special or privileged about human beings.

Second, Darwin suggested that, while evolution could be understood rationally, the natural environment was neither a rational nor an orderly place. Instead, nature was a cruel mistress, where individuals and species generally struggled with one another for

survival or the control of a particular environmental niche. Natural selection translated into the “survival of the fittest”. Those with the most useful or dominating characteristics were the ones that survived. The natural world all of a sudden was not the benign and harmonious place that it once had been. It, and us, were essentially *meaningless* except as the environment for perpetuating genetic material. Third, and most menacing for those with a humanist outlook on life, Darwin’s theory appeared to suggest that all *human values* and morality had only one fundamental purpose – the survival of the fittest in the species. There was no clear place for morality in Darwin’s scheme. Spiritual and religious values, as well, seemed irrelevant to a very earthly struggle to procreate and survive.

The *perceptions* of Darwin’s theory were, in some respects, more important than its reality. For example, the *struggle of the fittest* was taken all out of proportion. The emphasis on the *disharmony* of nature ignored the fact that adaptation to the environment took place over millennia. Finally, Darwin did believe that the development of sympathy and morality, genetically possible because of the tear duct, did make human beings very different from anything in the animal kingdom. But a western civilization that clung to the notion of a special mission for humanity, and ever more faintly to religious hope, could be excused for feeling that, if science was right, they had a lot more in common with ant hills than with utopian or spiritual dreams. Even the loss of Satan might be regretted in this biologically determined world, because the devil’s presence suggested that men and women had souls and that good and evil were real.

The reaction to Darwin tended to be polarized. Many scientists defended Darwin’s methodology and argument. Many non-scientists built Darwin’s theory into a stupidly vicious argument for the colonization of the world by the superior races and the weeding out of unhealthy individuals from the species. The negative reaction of many religious thinkers to Darwin’s theory has been well documented. But a host of European thinkers, including Frederich Nietzsche, pointed to Darwin as just the latest example of the ultimate sacrifice of creative humanity on the altar of reason and science. Science and technology might produce goods and services for us to consume but the price was that our lives were rendered meaningless. Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a critical figure in this discussion because it was he who documented the nihilistic tendencies in the Western tradition that stemmed from its obsession with reason and its rejection of the fundamentally irrational and tragic but life affirming qualities of myth, music and chant, poetry and rhythm, dance and trance, and, of course, mirth. Long ago, before Plato and Christianity made us serious, Western civilization balanced the forces of creativity (Apollo) and connection (Dionysus). But modern Westerners had completely forgotten how to laugh; relearning how to be human was going to be very, very difficult.

The modern mistake was confusing part of *reality* with the whole and subjecting that part to reason. The nature controlled and dissected by rationalism was an impoverished slice of existence. The more holistic and fundamental reality still recognized by non-western cultures left room for identifications between individuals, communities and the universe that the Greek God Dionysus symbolized. Without Dionysus, Apollo was rootless instead of grounded, clever instead of wise, critic rather than creator. Of course,

Nietzsche believed that we could not simply deny the cultural developments of many centuries in the West. Nietzsche was not suggesting that we reject science or convert to paganism, even though he would have undoubtedly preferred that to the sterile and enervated modern society that he saw strangling our basic humanity. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he suggested that music, especially music based on primal folk rhythms, could provide the starting point for a re-engagement of the artist and the intellectual with life. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1884) his solution was the development of a group of wise men – *supermen* – who not only understood the dilemma of a lop-sidedly rationalized Western culture but also could begin creating a new set of values that would transcend positivism.

Nietzsche was a German. One of the most sophisticated challenges to the hegemony of positivism came from a new historical tradition that had its roots in the philosophy of Hegel and the German tradition of intellectual thought. The positivist approach was always weaker in German where writers were much more fascinated by the culture and *spirit* of a people than the individualized data of sense perception. Understanding the spirit of a people meant devaluing the ‘facts’ and developing one’s *bildung* or sympathetic capacity and moral character. The scientific approach that dominated in England, France and Italy, at least up until 1870, was not suited to understanding culture at a deep level. It characteristically focused on hard data, individual achievements, and advances in material life. It could not explain why people who were progressing economically could feel culturally alienated.

The German idealists helped to spread a continental critique of positivism as hopelessly superficial and ultimately uninteresting. Understanding human societies and human beings was not the same thing as understanding nature argued the idealists. Human nature was nothing like physical nature, even if it had a biological component. Idealists began to focus on human culture, human subjectivity and what we today might call forms of consciousness or *mentalités*. Positivism or the conjunction of rationalism and realism was not the only or the truest interpretation. The historically minded Germans, and later on Italians like Benedetto Croce, suggested that positivism was simply one paradigm among many that needed to be *contextualized* within culture. In other words, the really interesting question was not whether scientific explanation, or religion or any other perspective for that matter, was right or wrong. There is no absolute right or wrong in anything that has to do with human thought and culture. The interesting question is why positivism or this particular conjunction of rationalism and realism became so dominant in the West. And, of course, the related question would be: why has Western rationalism become so pervasive a feature of modernity as to literally wipe other and non-western perspectives off the face of the map? If you guessed that it wasn’t simply a case of European colonialism, you’d be absolutely right says a guy by the name of Max Weber.

What Weber argued that was so depressing to him and his future was that it was not so much scientific positivism that screwed us, but our own belief in rationality -- our subjectivity had ended up trapping us within an iron cage. And we can’t get out because our rationality is not something we can now change, at least not without some very

negative consequences. Rationality has invaded our heads and our relations, and it perverts all relationships in its image. Culture will not save us!

### **Max Weber: Theorist of Modernity**

Max Weber is someone that you don't usually run into in a Humanities course, which is a bit weird if you consider that he was the quintessential *fin de siècle* theorist and, according to many, the pre-eminent modern intellectual. This is probably because Max Weber was one of the founders of social science and people in humanities don't care to read things by social scientists. More's the pity because you'd have a much better understanding of what's at stake in works like Dostoyevsky's 'The Grand Inquisitor' if you had read a little of Max. The Germans and the Russians had a lot in common. Both of them were upset with trends in modernity, especially the lack of spirit or spirituality in modern life. Whereas Dostoyevsky *described* traits that he disliked in modernity, Weber *defined* them in ways that social and political theorists continue to use to this day. Among the concepts that Weber defined was modern bureaucracy as the relentlessly efficient *iron cage* that ultimately made Western individualism and freedom irrelevant and the increasing control of technocratic elites inescapable. In fact, you could plausibly recast Max Weber as Dostoyevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*.

It's a bit unfair for me to lecture you about Max Weber without allowing you to read him. But his language is difficult and getting a good sense of what he's about would demand multiple passages, so I hope you won't mind if I sum him up for you. The first work I want to talk about is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* where he showed why Europe embraced rationalism and the capitalist market. Then I want to go on to discuss his writing on bureaucracy. As we go through his argument, it is crucial to appreciate that, while Weber might accept and defend modernization, like the *Grand Inquisitor* he did so extremely *reluctantly*. He was a particular kind of German writer who believed that modern life was something to be *endured*. Even the pain and sorrow that the *Grand Inquisitor* describes was felt personally by Max Weber. But he felt that a logical person had no other choice than to plug himself or herself into the modern rational system. The only alternative was a potentially horrific barbarism, where the happiness of the majority would be sacrificed to the freedom of a few. Like the *Grand Inquisitor*, he wishes that he could embrace Christ, spirituality, spirit or whatever you want to call it. But he makes his stand, lives and dies, in the modern *disenchanted* wasteland of the spirit.

I'm getting ahead of myself here. Let's start with a very young and idealistic university student by the name of Max Weber who doesn't know that he's destined to be one of movers and shapers of our notion of modernity. He's a kid who likes to talk about theology and religious values more than anything else. What makes Weber a modern thinker, however, is that he found himself working very hard to understand and to come to some kind of accommodation with modernity. Weber set himself the task of bringing together the subjective/relativistic perspective of the idealists with the rationalistic/scientific world of the positivists. In the process, he ended up inventing a discipline that would become more important as decades went on – sociology. Although

it is difficult to summarize the many different kinds of writings that this brilliant individual produced, we can highlight some of his major insights. The first was that no account of human life or action was meaningful unless it took into account the inherent *subjectivity* of human beings. A scientist or social scientist might want to view human behaviour biologically or statistically – in terms of cause and effect relationships or mathematical patterns. The result would not be particularly interesting or even useful unless one understood the importance of culture. Human beings are not biological machines, like Pavlov's dog, but people who can only act on the basis of their beliefs. Desires may have some biological base but they are tied to cultural beliefs. And, contrary to what biological, utilitarian and capitalist thinkers might believe, people act on the basis of those beliefs.

Subjective ideas can be creative and autonomous forces. The fascinating example of a powerful subjective idea that Weber provided was that of religion, specifically protestant religion. In the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber turned both materialist and positivist analyses on their head by suggesting that Protestant values were instrumental in advancing capitalism and science – the two primary examples of realistic and rationalistic practices in Western culture. Protestantism emerged within a medieval society that thought more highly of the world to come than this inferior earthly existence. While Protestants did not reject the spiritual focus (rather they intensified it), they dramatically altered the connections between heaven and earth by privileging the relationship between God and those chosen individuals to whom he gave the gift of grace.

In the Protestant paradigm, the world consisted of those who were damned to eternal punishment and those who God, in his infinite mercy had decided to save. No longer could individuals *earn* a place in heaven by doing good works, obtaining papal indulgences, or, to cite a contemporary example, offering themselves as martyrs. Earthly existence, however, was a training ground for the chosen, who had to practice a tight discipline, not only to demonstrate their respect for God, but also to separate themselves from the ungodly. This emphasis on self and social discipline made Protestant communities models of rational order and decorum. According to Weber, this Protestant ethic or mentality or subjectivity, dissolved the medieval synthesis by getting rid of miracles, angels, demons, saints or anything that might conceivably get in the way of the relationship between the chosen individual and his or her God. Protestantism made these intermediate relationships and traditional mysteries *irrational*, thereby propelling Western civilization in an exclusively rational direction. That same Protestant rationality became increasingly disciplined over time, eventually structuring the entire life of the Protestant into minute parts, typically with the aid of a clock that could ensure that not a minute's time on earth was wasted.

Long before the Enlightenment advanced its theory of material progress, says Weber, Western consciousness began to cultivate the rationalist character of capital accumulation. Protestantism was crucial because it was the first religious system not only to accept capitalist accumulation as a legitimate *vocation*, but also to rationally discipline capitalist behaviour. Capitalism in its early phase requires an absolute and disciplined focus on reinvesting all profits so as to grow the capital pool sufficiently to

the point where capitalism could ‘take off’. This is a problem for all developing countries where developing the capital pool usually requires personal sacrifice. The Protestant of old was the perfect early capitalist because he was disciplined with respect to money making without being worldly. Thus, all profits were generally reinvested into the enterprise. What Weber is saying here is that a highly subjective, idealist, spiritual set of values, helped to make modern capitalism, and to a certain extent modern science, possible. Without those disciplined Modern values, would modern society have ever emerged? Weber doesn’t think so.

It doesn’t really matter whether you buy into the details of this famous ‘Weber thesis’ about capitalism. All that matters is that you get the point. Rational and realistic forms of behaviour, including capitalism, are not inevitable. Western rationalism and realism developed in a specific *context*, whether we want to emphasize certain kinds of Christianity or not. That *context* was different, not necessarily better, than other non-Western contexts. Weber’s historical world allows for creative possibilities. You might think that this means that Weber is similar to some of today’s postmodern theorists who believe that everything is relative. In fact, you yourself may be something of a relativist, especially about matters of belief. There is a sense today that anyone can believe anything that they want. Max Weber got totally pissed off at that type of thinking. It was typical of those who thought they could reject modernity and create their own little world. It’s worth correcting the relativist interpretation because Weber and Dostoyevsky were remarkably similar in their analytical approach but not, it must be said, in their focus. Whereas Weber focused on a social and cultural reality, Dostoyevsky focused on a psychological reality.

Let’s get Weber right before we speculate on the similarities and differences between himself and Dostoyevsky. The cultural world of the past and present is not a world where ‘anything goes’ analytically. People may have subjective beliefs but they still live in an objective reality and their behaviour conforms to certain patterns. Both kinds of reality need to be understood and the best way to understand them, to put them together, if you will is to combine subject and object in *concepts* and to combine *concepts* into concept clusters and theories. The cultural concepts that Weber focused on were *ideal types*. For example, there are lots of different kinds of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Buddhists. You can avoid any kind of analysis by simply suggesting that every religion is different, every religion is the same, every practitioner is different, every practitioner is the same. But then you don’t get any kind of analytical awareness. If you want to understand terrorism in the Muslim community, you can’t be prejudiced into thinking that every Muslim is a potential terrorist or so naïve as to suggest that there is not really any relationship between Islam and terrorism. As a scholar of society, you need to try to isolate the factors that most Islamic terrorists share, while being aware that the characteristics that shape terrorists can change from context to context. A second generation French Islamic terrorist might be a sufficiently different *type* than an Iraqi member of Al Quida. In either case, however, you wouldn’t get a good understanding or a useable ideal type unless you took into account the subjective beliefs that are generally shared.

Weber is clear that you can only understand the evolution of modern society if you understand it subjectively as well as objectively. A major Weberian critique of modern economics would be that it assumes that everyone acts out of 'utilitarian self-interest', which is so obviously ridiculous that one wonders how on earth anyone could make that assumption. Certainly, the early Protestants were not seeking happiness, they were *professing* deeply held spiritual values. The motivations of today's actors in the modern economy are much more obviously utilitarian – i.e. maximizing individual happiness – but most people have still have a combination of motives, i.e. achieving respectability, working with others, providing for one's family that makes market rationality overly simplistic. In any case, Max Weber would be the first to suggest that market capitalism isn't really about a system that maximizes individual happiness. Rather, it's an important system within a bureaucratic and rationalized social system that is maximally *efficient*. Modern markets, modern politics, and all modern institutions are ideal types of rationally functioning systems. In all modern institutions, what counts is not the individual but the system. And the system is essentially bureaucratic.

Early Protestants imposed rational discipline on themselves; their self-discipline was like a heavenly cloak that they wore lightly because they were given their vocation from God. But something very disturbing happened on the way to modernity – rationalism became autonomous. Efficient systems were established that generated their own laws. Rationalism became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you look closely at the way institutions are developing in the West, says Weber, you see that rational systems have moved past the phases of scientific positivism and all the stages of capitalism. What has happened is the all-embracing *rationalization of human life* along bureaucratic lines. It isn't either the scientist or the capitalist that will rule tomorrow, says Weber, it the bureaucratic manager. Over time, it will become clearer that the political leader and the bureaucrat will become one and the same. Everyone, even the leaders, will be subject to the laws of the *iron cage of rationality*.

Sounds a bit sinister doesn't it? It gets worse. Bureaucracy may be a pain in the ass, but how are you going to get rid of it? Remember that modern society is complex and complex systems have to be integrated with one another if that complex society is going to be maintained. Is there any alternative? Sure, there are still lots of societies, communities and activities in the world that don't conform to this model of rational efficiency. The problem is that many of these alternative possibilities strike the modern mind as irrational. Rationality is so much a part of Western consciousness that it is difficult even to envision alternatives. Globalization clearly will not save us Westerners from ourselves, because it is a social fact that, when a rational system confronts a less efficient system, it is invariably the rational one that wins. We often feel nostalgia for the less bureaucratic past, and we like to visit less modern societies as a tourist, but we are no longer mentally equipped to live in any of those locations. Getting out from under our own rationality is difficult.

What is more, rational systems have a remarkable capacity for transforming and co-opting any attempts at different behaviour. Bureaucratic systems can organize, coordinate, streamline and systematize any kind of behaviour that you can imagine. The

perfect example is the gay relationship that used to be regarded as aberrant, deviant and dangerous. But it is obvious that these and any other kinds of relationships that you can imagine are capable of bureaucratic normalization. The first gay divorces are now taking place with exactly the same rules and regulations as traditional marriages. What is infinitely more interesting than the long-winded debates over the traditional marriage and the family is the ways that marriage and family life are being intruded upon by bureaucratic regulations. The last places you would expect bureaucratic systems to prevail are such medieval institutions as the university and the church, but all of these are organizations and susceptible of being organized bureaucratically.

In a bureaucratic universe – that is witnessing the convergence of societies as different as capitalistic and communist within a global system – does it make a lot of sense to talk about things like free will and human choice? The new reality is that people are made to fit into processes and systems that they only dimly understand if at all. The highly rationalized world that was once a vision of the heavenly community on other, now systematically eliminates any vital spirit, and most people don't even notice because, love it or hate it, social systems are good at delivering basic services on an equal basis. The human world, for Weber as well as Dostoyevsky, was becoming cold, clinical and *soulless*, contributing to an increase in alienation and sadness for some. But not such a bad place to be for those who don't reflect too much on those things.

The word that Weber liked to use to describe modern life was *disenchanted*. But although it greatly pained Weber to think about such a world, he really couldn't see any realistic alternative. The fact that a rational and realistic outlook was built right into the modern psyche made it inconceivable that any kind of liberation would occur other than ones that reinforced the system. In fact, the only possible liberation that he could envision was the one so brilliantly depicted by Dostoyevsky in *The Grand Inquisitor*. Under certain abnormal conditions, such as economic depression, it was possible that modern society could become so alienating and disenchanting as to stimulate the exploration of alternatives to all the systematic complexity. It was precisely at these periods of instability that people might gravitate towards a charismatic leader, who offered an alternative that appealed to more basic features of humanity. Instead of being a saviour, however, the *charismatic individual* was as likely to be a Hitler and to appeal to dangerous irrational elements. In the worst-case scenario, the result would be temporary chaos and slaughter. In the best-case scenario, such experiments were bound to be temporary and abnormal episodes in the rationally structured, and thereby, legitimized world of modern systems (objective) and modern consciousness (subjective).

Now, you might think that Weber was far too much of a pessimist about modernity and that, even though he was prepared to endure and defend modernity, that he greatly overlooked the positive features that balanced the negatives. Also, you might want to *contextualize* him in the much same way that he contextualized early capitalism, i.e. as someone who lived at a particular time and who had a particular axe to grind. Although you'd have to give some thought to his fascinating insight into the spread of bureaucracy that does make it appear that our limited freedoms are shrinking and that even the entrepreneurship that was recently thought to be the driving force of capitalism is being



clobbered by increasingly bureaucratic corporations. You'd need to take his account of the objective limitations on subjective freedom seriously before you talked about how liberated and happy we moderns are. And, you'd have to see whether your definitions of freedom and happiness were not merely conventions designed to grease the wheels of systems that are really the autonomous actors of our age. If you are only arguing for happy cyborgs, you haven't really gotten around the problem of modernity as analyzed by Weber. And, even if you got past Weber, you still have to deal with a very unhappy camper by the name of Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

### **Russian Realism Revisited**

Weber's treatment of *charismatic* and *rational authority* that comes down on the side of the latter has striking parallels with Freud's later argument in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Both authors were concerned to emphasize the need for adjustment, balance and responsibility in an imperfect, and much more oppressive, modern world than earlier optimists could have imagined. This image of our basic humanity suffering in an inhospitable world has distinctly tragic qualities. It is not only the fate of *modern men and women* to be lonely wanderers but the mechanical, rationalized and bureaucratic universe that they inhabit offers increasingly fewer meaningful choices to the individual. Every kind of stimulation may be offered, but stimulation to what end? What is the meaning of life in this environment? What prevents us from experiencing the true tragic vision is partly the recognition that the works of Weber and Freud are academic rather than literary, but also the fact that these writings have a very defined and limited setting. The geographical setting is *fin de siècle* mainstream Europe, and the social context is a well-developed bourgeois society with an established, if problematic, culture of positivism and progress. The mood may be one of discomfort, disenchantment, and self-indulgent *ennui* of a civilization poised for, but not yet entered into, a decline. In this sharply etched, insular and somnambulant world, it is difficult to evoke the kind of passion and confrontation that makes for great literature, realistic or otherwise. For that to happen, you might need a society where: 1) science had never played such a hegemonic role; 2) the bourgeois capitalist class had not established its values; and 3) the socio-economic issues were more tumultuous and traumatic. An ideal cauldron for experimenting with modern realism and offering an alternative to rationalism was Russia, a society moving from feudal tradition to a modern western civilization without any mediating agencies.

From 1880s, Russian literature invaded and shook European consciousness by its roots. Turgenev and Gogol were important figures, but it was Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky whose names were on the lips of most cultured Europeans by 1890. I talked a bit about the characteristics that defined and differentiated Russian literature from its mainstream European counterpart in my last lecture, but allow me the luxury of adding to some of them here:

1. Russian literature was serious and heavy in the classical sense. There was little that was light about it. There was no literary character of the "low" in Russian literature.

2. Russian literature is still feudal or medieval in its concern to present an “everyman” – a universal figure of humanity. One can find class, rank and position in Russian novels, but the reality that is foregrounded is the essential humanity that we all share. By implication, there are no *distinct* social classes in Russian literature.
3. The background social, cultural and economic environment is very lightly painted in Russian literature because writers want to focus in on the humanity that is shared. The goodness and evil that is in men’s hearts.
4. This essentially medieval and seemingly anti-modern focus nevertheless blended with something quintessentially modern – the focus on private life and the development of the self that had been in development for several centuries.
5. So, unlike some other European realistic literature, you didn’t need to be a Russian to appreciate it. You also didn’t need to live in a city, since the setting didn’t really matter. The dominant setting in a Russian novel was a single room.
6. While other Europeans were uneasy with progress and mildly disenchanted with modernity, it is in Russian literature that we find the most powerful reaction and the most intense sense that a moral crisis has developed that may well lead to catastrophe.
7. The catastrophe in question, however, is not so much a social or public catastrophe as it is an individual and personal catastrophe. The most “essential characteristic” of Russian literature, is the “unqualified, unlimited, and passionate intensity of the *inner experience* in the characters portrayed”. The essential battleground is the individual’s mind or soul. And this is particularly the case with the novels of Dostoyevsky.

Another way of saying all of this is that the recognition of the individual characters spiritual and ethical development – a characteristic of medieval literature – is still very present in Russian literature. When these dynamic characters confront aspects of more modern western culture, a conflict is bound to result.

Now we’ve already discussed Dostoyevsky’s most recognizably modern work *Notes from the Underground*. But that is in many ways a younger and more experimental novella than Dostoyevsky’s more mature writing, especially, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In some ways, you might identify more with *Notes* because underground man has no determined character and floats unhappily on the surface of modernity like many of us. It’s a brilliant exploration of consciousness and is concerned with illuminating the everyman in the bitter son of the city. But Dostoyevsky detested underground man, and it must be said the elements of underground man in himself, and did not want to devote his most serious attention to this. That kind of writing could be left to Frenchmen like Baudelaire.

*Notes* is highly ambiguous, whereas most serious Russian literature wants us to understand what is at stake in modernity and to defend our souls against it.

### **The Brothers Karamazov**

*The Brothers Karamazov* is considered by many to be the greatest novel ever written, especially by people who used to call themselves *humanists* and who believed in something called a literary *canon*. Those people have talked endlessly about *The Brothers Karamazov* and provide fascinating insights, but they also tell you a lot about themselves. What typically disgusts them about modern life is not only its impact on moral values, but also its ambiguity about good and evil. The cancer at the heart of modernity is the destruction of spiritual values and moral purpose and, by implication, the things that make us human. For all of these disaffected critics of modernity, nobody explained the issues better than Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. So, what do you think? Is it worth spending some time to talk about the book that is the modern bible for many? And not only for Europeans but for lots of writers in developing countries as well, who discovered someone who was speaking their language and who was delineating THE LOSS OF SOUL in modern culture.

Dostoyevsky was working on the novel for 3 years prior to his death in 1881. This work had been in his mind much longer than that, and he clearly considered it to be his *magnum opus*. Ostensibly, the novel revolves around a highly dramatic classical theme – parricide, or the killing of one’s father. In this case, it turns out that the real crime is in the mind rather than in real life (which is more real?) because the ‘real’ murderer is Smerdyakov, who makes himself the instrument of the desires of at least two of the three brothers, the intellectual Ivan and the military *bon vivant* Dmitry. The theme of the novel is much more spiritually profound – the battle between good and evil for the control of the human soul. This theme gets a highly dramatic treatment through the intertwining lives of the 3 brothers, including the highly spiritual Alyosha named after Dostoyevsky’s son who died young. What becomes clear to readers willing to delve deeper than the plot is that the 3 brothers symbolically represent aspects of the human soul, with the associated strengths that lead to goodness and the weaknesses that lead to evil. Dmitry is a sensualist who embraces and affirms life, but is subject to excesses of appetite and, especially lust. Ivan represents subtle intelligence and understanding, but he commits the sin of pride by wanting to shape the world to fit his reason. Alyosha is a highly spiritual and artistic person who can divine men’s souls, but he lacks staying power when confronted by the persistence of evil and the temptations of the world.

The 3 characters taken together reflect the tensions felt by a spiritually minded Russian confronted with a materialist and positivist western culture that has not only dethroned God and the Devil, but also made them irrelevant to the individual and national life. The setting of course, is the disintegration of a Russian family and an orthodox Christian Russian state, but these are also metaphors for the instability and decay of European civilization. The separation of the 3 brothers and their temporary estrangement from one another represents the fragmentation of the entire society and the individual soul. “The whole idea of the story is to show that universal disorder now reigns everywhere.” The

novelist's goal to show the path back to a holistic unity where the brothers, the different aspects of the soul, are united. What is most revealing about this reconstruction of the soul is that the author cannot discover any support in modern society; it must therefore be a private individual project.

The reasons for this "universal disorder" are the erosion of the 3 kinds of "passionate convictions" – intellectual, spiritual and sensual --or their version into materialist or political forms (i.e. democracy, socialism and anarchism). Dostoyevsky was concerned to elevate the human and especially the spiritual conscience over political ideas that he believed reduced "mankind to the level of cattle" that could be herded by bureaucrats and technocrats. His fundamental insight is that all social technocrats – those aiming to create the perfect earthly society in whatever form – really fear and repress all that is essentially human in themselves and others. For Dostoyevsky, these would be political leaders are part and parcel of the rationalizing tendency in European life that began with the Enlightenment. While it may have begun with good intentions, seeking to improve the condition of mankind, its inner rationale was to deny and control anything that was inconvenient in mankind. The battle between good and evil, the freedom of the individual to choose, the guilt that one felt from choosing incorrectly – these were the first things to go in creating a rational paradise of control.

Despite his disgust with rationalism and a realism that denied the soul, Dostoyevsky's novel evidences a painstaking attention to realistic description. The author sought to "deepen and widen the realistic features of his novel" to include the inner man. He wanted his characters, even when they functioned allegorically, to be authentic in terms of psychological character. Dostoyevsky's realism was foreground realism – the realism of his characters, not as classes or people from a particular geographical location – but as distinct individuals with an inner life. Unlike the underground man who prided himself on being a mouse rather than a man, these characters had a soul, even if it was fragmented and damaged by modernity. Dostoyevsky variously described his technique as *finding the man in man* or *depicting the depths of the human soul*. What makes *The Brothers Karamazov* something unique is the way that Dostoyevsky brings together the anti-positivist critique of western civilization with some of the most psychologically developed characters in the history of the novel. No wonder, then that the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud, thought the novel the greatest ever written.

The characters are so well defined that different readers identify with different brothers. Most identify with Ivan, an intellectual who emphasizes the rational/logical side of human nature. But the deeper meaning is that all 3 brothers are Karamazovs who share the same genetic material. Dostoyevsky wants us to look at them as different aspects of the human psyche – Weber's ideal types -- that must be integrated and balanced holistically in order to realize what is really a human ideal. In the fullest sense, "the main hero of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the three brothers in their spiritual unity". It should be noticed that this is a novel written by a patriarchal Russian male. The women in the novel are realistically drawn, but they are not distinct and independent beings like the men. Grushenka is connected to Dmitry; Liza is linked to Alyosha; Katerina is the alter ego of Ivan. All these connections unfold gradually as Dostoyevsky allows us to

discover the essential *souls* within the external personality. All of the characters are linked in an obvious tragedy that ostensibly resembles a soap opera. But the deep structure of the novel is the battle between good and evil for the human heart. The central character through whom this battle is played out is Dmitry (sometimes called Mitya), whose *heartaches* and *guilt* are described in detail.

In Dmitry, and in the combined Karamazov psyche, Dostoyevsky anticipates Freud and psychoanalysis by presenting us the drama and tragedy that is the modern *divided self* in search of unity. For Dostoyevsky, unlike Freud, the divided self is not the state that is natural to man. It is the product of an Enlightened agenda that sought to put man at the center of the conceptual universe and that ended up by degrading man. The scientific search for truth, in particular, had made man nothing more than a part of nature and a product of his/her environment. Man's spiritual core was lost in the process and, as man abandoned spirituality, it could appear that God had abandoned man. Ivan, the intellectual brother, rejects religion for just this reason. He feels that God, if He exists, has allowed too much suffering in the world. Ivan prefers human reason and human judgment to God. Ivan's position and its implications are developed in the most famous segment of any novel ever written. Even those who don't consider *The Brothers Karamazov* the best, consider 'The Grand Inquisitor' to be an absolutely brilliant piece of writing. Bet you didn't know that when you began reading it, did you?

### **The Grand Inquisitor**

Scholars have been discussing and referring to 'The Grand Inquisitor' continuously since the 1880s and now you've had some opportunity to explore it in tutorial. If you don't think it's a great piece of writing, then you should defer judgment until you have a better idea of what great writing is. 'The Grand Inquisitor' is where the intellectual Ivan explains his position to the spiritual but not so smart Alyosha by telling a story set in Spain during the time of the Inquisition when people were tortured to death for not conforming to religious values. At the historical period of the Inquisition, the Church controlled Catholic Europe. The role of the Inquisition was to detect any heresy or defection from the religious program established from the papacy down. Alyosha's a bit thick at getting the tale's deeper meaning, but Ivan's not going to spell it out for him. At one point, Alyosha has a brainwave and blurts out that the Inquisitor's position can only really be one of an atheist, because he knows Jesus Christ is real, has Jesus right in front of him, but rejects him. He comes close to burning Jesus, but he can't do it in the end. Jesus kisses him and he lets Jesus walk off into the night.

What in heaven's name (pardon the pun) is going on here? Obviously, the Inquisitor is not an atheist in the sense of denying Christ's divinity. If he's an atheist it's because he *chooses* to be an atheist for reasons of rationality rather than belief. What's more, the Inquisitor is a rather complicated person, isn't he? He says that he feels pain, that he doesn't get any pleasure from being in control. Yet he's proud, isn't he? He's far too proud ever to admit he's wrong. He'll defend himself even on judgment day, because God's way is too hard, too inhuman, results in too much suffering, doesn't take into account what all but a few human beings are really like, and says to hell (perhaps

literally) to everyone else. But he's a pathetically sad little Inquisitor at the end isn't he? One kiss from a real rather than an artificial divinity makes his heart "glow". It doesn't make him give up his logic, however, because reason refuses to recognize any realities that cannot be dissected, organized and controlled.

You can really feel sorry for Alyosha here because he's totally out of his depth with Ivan, who can't help but keep laughing as he spells out his Euclidian logic to someone with an artistic temperament. Dostoyevsky is on Alyosha's side, but he can't let him dominate this argument for three reasons. First, we really need to understand where Ivan is coming from, what propelled him to choose his secular vision of humanity over Alyosha's naïve spirituality. We need to fully understand this kind of modern consciousness and suffering before we can come out the other side. Second, we need not only to understand but also to work through all of the issues for ourselves without the author making the final judgment for us. Christ is not going to reveal himself; we have to find Christ or Mohammed or Buddha or spirituality for ourselves. Finally, we need to appreciate the difference between the kind of modern intelligence, that recasts alternative arguments in its own likeness and beats them down imperiously, and kind of mature wisdom that realizes that intelligence isn't everything.

It becomes increasingly clear to the reader, if not immediately apparent to Alyosha, that the literary function of the Grand Inquisitor has little to do with the Pope or Roman Catholicism. The Grand Inquisitor represents all attempts on the part of religious and political leaders to control society *in its own best interest*. Obviously, the term *Grand Inquisitor* sends a negative message since few in modern Europe and even in orthodox Christian Russia would want a return to torturing those who did not conform to arbitrary socio-cultural standards. Dostoyevsky clearly wants to suggest that some aspects of modernity resemble the kind of total control of reality that the Inquisition represents. However, modern control is much more subtle because it disguises itself as rationality, claims to represent the desires of the majority, and focuses on the mind rather than the body. To echo Max Weber, the Grand Inquisitor is ultimately a subjective, not an objective, phenomenon.

Some Western European analysts point to 'The Grand Inquisitor' as a political document warning against the kind of mind control inherent in socialism or communism, movements that were certainly current among the Russian intelligentsia. For sure, Dostoyevsky didn't like left wing politics. But 'The Grand Inquisitor' is a much more profound critique of modernity and a defense of the freedom of will than that. Politically speaking, it would be much more accurate to say that Dostoyevsky's target is any kind of state bureaucracy, that could as easily be capitalist and utilitarian as socialist or communist. 'The Grand Inquisitor' certainly should be seen as a warning against the power of all rationalizing forces -- politics, capital and culture -- that emphasize efficiency and happiness over freedom. It is a profound warning against the modern tendency to confuse freedom with utility or the maximization of individual happiness. Happiness seekers, far from being free, are chained to their desires. You can easily control them with drugs as in Huxley's *Brave New World* or with propaganda as in

Orwell's *1984*. On the political front, therefore, 'The Grand Inquisitor' exposes some very dangerous tendencies in modern society.

Dostoyevsky's real front, his real battleground, is the mind. Modernity is an insidious kind of mind control that operates through any and all political, social and cultural channels. It is a satanic force within all of us, and that completely dominates most of us. The modern world is not so much a real object as a *set of ideas* that traditional religion has always warned against. You can pick your own religious flavour (a sentence that Dostoyevsky would have hated); Dostoyevsky's religious flavour was Orthodox Christianity. But religion, as the Grand Inquisitor demonstrated, could easily become just another modern rationalist bureaucracy, unless deep spiritual meanings were processed by the heart. In fact, if spirituality was to survive the onslaught of rationalism, it could not depend on institutions that could easily be co-opted but must be part of the care and feeding of the soul.

Modernity is nothing new and not an exclusively Western phenomenon as its all too easy victory over traditional societies demonstrates. Modernity is evil itself. It is the battle between Satan and Christ, or if you wish, between good and evil that must be fought on all fronts, but at the end of the day is a lonely and an intensely personal battle. The Inquisitor sums it up in his account of the temptation of Christ by Satan (or *Him*). Christ represents spiritual values; Satan represents secular values. The first temptation is materialism. The tempter argues that bread or worldly goods are the fundamental need and desires of the vast majority of people. Most people don't need or want freedom; they want to be fed. Utopia or what the Grand Inquisitor refers to as the *building* is complete when people's material needs are met. Religion has nothing to say to this need and is therefore irrelevant. In the second temptation, the secular visionary argues that a free conscience and genuine spirituality is a hassle. No one likes to think that they might do things that are evil or sinful. Most people want to think all their desires are "permitted". The vastly superior and more humanely secular way to keep people in line is to manipulate their desires while keeping them in awe of authority. If you can throw in a couple of seemingly miraculous (i.e. exciting) entertainments and diversions here and there, all the better. Once the Grand Inquisitor has rid the world of hunger and tricked our impressionable human nature into believing that everything is good and positive, or will be in the foreseeable future, the stage is set for the one remaining requirement for happiness on earth. What people want more than anything is unity and a sense of absorption within a bigger whole. What politics and economics are all striving for is a "universal state" that the Grand Inquisitor describes as "one unanimous and harmonious ant heap". Real autonomy must involve a lot more than belonging to an efficient antheap

Now, it doesn't take too much imagination to see why this outline of all human history has had such a lasting impact. It begs the entire question of whether people want real freedom and whether our liberal society liberates the individual or chains him/her to desires that are easily manipulated. It effectively illuminates the narrowness of materialism. It exposes the many ways that we shove the problem of evil under the carpet, including the evil that is in ourselves. It shows how our political, religious and social leaders can manipulate us by appealing to our desire for belonging. It puts the

entire issue of freedom on a different level than is customary in our liberal capitalist assumptions. And it highlights the dangers of a future, where we might still use words like ‘freedom’, ‘the individual’ and even ‘heaven’ but they would either be irrelevant, a sham, or a very modern tool for manipulating our needs. The Grand Inquisitor is a bit sad about this need for manipulation but he thinks that it is absolutely necessary. Otherwise, there would be too much room for a charismatic Jesus to foul up what is a brilliant case of social planning.

The rationally planned society has to be built to fit average human beings. It has to continually define what is normal as a set of assumptions about human nature in the case of the Grand Inquisitor or as a set of statistical averages and gallop poles for the modern bureaucrat. The modern equivalent of the Grand Inquisitor, the politician and bureaucrat, is not completely cynical or devoid of morality. He or she may occasionally wish that there were an escape from the iron cage of a planned society. But the alternative, an unplanned world, is inconceivable to the modern mind. In an earlier section, I pointed out that Max Weber is symbolic of the modern viewpoint – someone with a deep appreciation for spirituality and holism – but feeling forced to accommodate those feelings and hopes to the modern environment. He’s not a little like the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ who makes a conscious decision, not to embrace but to work within the bars of the iron cage.

### **Weber and Dostoyevsky**

Max Weber and Fyodor Dostoyevsky never met and, to my knowledge, never mentioned one another. (Dostoyevsky died when Weber was still a very young man.) One was a sociologist, the other a novelist, and those kinds of writers had long since ceased to talk to one another. What is remarkable, however, is how both in their own way reflected *fin de siècle* consciousness. As a theorist of modernity, what is striking about Weber is just how much he despised it as an iron “mechanism” of sufficient force to bend flesh and blood human beings to its wishes. And nothing could be more damning than his summary of the modern men and women as “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; and this nullity is caught in the delusion that it has achieved a level of development never before attained by mankind”. Next to Weber, the enemy of modernization, Fyodor Dostoyevsky comes off as relatively optimistic because at least there appears to the literary mind the possibility of communicating a different inner reality.

That inner reality would be richly explored by countless other writers after Dostoyevsky, but typically without the same passion. It was bound to be thus if only because the *fin de siècle* mood eventually passed and those who were not as inclined to view all of modernity as inherently problematic began to find hope again, largely on the basis that examples of fundamental human decency survived the modern flood. Two sources of optimism emerged that Weber discounted and Dostoyevsky ignored. The long overlooked voices of women, working people and people of colour seemed to suggest that democracy was not a sham, people’s inner lives remained robust, the loss of spirituality did not translate into immorality, and that not all modern developments fit



neatly behind the bars of the iron cage. The emergence of a popular culture that could occasionally revitalize elite culture and challenge its hegemony was a fascinating development.

Still, one should beware of complacency. What Dostoyevsky described as the evils of modernity are still very much with us. One center for free thought – the university – seems ripe for bureaucratic occupation. Globalization is beginning to look more like the corporatization and standardization of life than an opportunity to explore diversity. It may be the prejudice of an old man, but it seems to me that the video generation substitutes entertainment for thinking. Developments such as these feed into the schemes of Grand Inquisitors everywhere! And, don't forget, the Grand Inquisitor is in your head.

## *Jude the Obscure*

### A Changing Society

*Jude the Obscure* is primarily a novel about the possibility of a new kind of relationship between a man and a woman – a relationship based on love, sincerity and trust rather than social conventions. We'll get to that relationship in due course, but first I want to say something about the socio-economic context. The novel describes a recognizably modern society in many ways. First of all, it's a society that is governed by the market. Jude not only has to figure out not only how to earn a living but also how to make himself marketable in different places. He already demonstrated his entrepreneurial aptitude by investing in a horse and cart and creating a delivery service for his aunt Drusilla's backed goods. He's pretty adept at looking for and finding work in different locales. And he adjusts his skill set to meet his customers' needs and ability to pay. Second, this is a society where many people are much more comfortable moving around than ever before. A lot of people still live in sleepy little villages like Marygreen, but Jude and many others make it their business to *get out*. He travels around fairly routinely, not feeling particularly homesick; Christminster is Jude's dream home for much of the novel, but it's significance is as an elusive ideal rather than a real place. As a real place, it is a crumbling ruin with a seedy underbelly. There is no longer a clear 'home' for modern individuals like Jude. His home is his relationship with Sue.

What modernity lacks in a home, it compensates for in variety. It's 1895, and a lot of people don't stay in one place too long. Jude has residences in Christminster (a pseudonym for Oxford), Melchester, Shaston, and Aldbrickham. His first wife Arabella emigrates to Australia. Jude, Arabella and Sue and other quite ordinary people are travelers and tourists. As attendance at the Great Wessex Agricultural Show suggests, lots of people are zooming around by trains that are making old England's ancient roadways and pathways irrelevant. Train schedules now dominate important aspects of ordinary life. Sue can't believe that something as powerful as a train will make a stop just for her. Of course, it's not *just* for her, but imagine how extraordinary it would seem to be let off at a remote station by a train running precisely to schedule:

To Sue it seemed strange that such a powerful organization as a railway train should be brought to a standstill on purpose for her – a fugitive from her lawful home. (177)

Trains obliterate many of the significant features of community and provide modern individuals with a remarkable degree of independence

All of this movement is also mirrored in the changing aspirations of people. The middle classes are tapping wealth and upward mobility from British industry and empire (Britain at this time is the first industrial superpower and the 'workshop to the world'). But even ordinary people share in these aspirations. Jude is rather exceptional, and perhaps somewhat deluded, in wanting to go to university at Christchurch, but many working men became interested in improving their minds and thereby

increasing their life opportunities. Mechanics Institutes are opened and literature and lectures for workingmen became regular features of life even in the smaller towns. Women faced more structural barriers to improvement, but some opportunities for women did emerge. Nursing was transformed from a low class occupation into a more noble profession by Florence Nightingale's efforts in the Crimean War; the new fangled typewriter allowed women to gradually take over the jobs of male clerks partly because it seemed a nice fit with their piano playing skills. Even for the lower classes, the advent of mass education, still controlled largely by the Anglican Church, did provide jobs for female teachers. Sue, for example, briefly attends a Normal School, the first teacher training program on the planet.

A few decades previously, in the 1840s, this modernization of British Society, closely imitated by other European societies, seemed to threaten social revolution. Some of the revolutionaries looked backward to a more traditional and supposedly cohesive society while others looked forward to a classless society. By the 1890s, however, at least most of the British people were sufficiently comfortable with the modern world to accommodate themselves to its reasons and rhythms. A notable exception, as we've seen in this course, were parts of the European intelligentsia who viewed the modern world as mechanical, utilitarian, cruel and bereft of spirit, heroism, and deeper meaningfulness. Hardy is part and parcel of this critique, especially in his distaste for the cruel ethic of the survival of the fittest that leads the most sensitive – as symbolized by little 'Father Time' – to despair. On the whole, however, the author Thomas Hardy seems to be on the side of modernity just as long as it practices what it promises – the freedom of individuals to discover themselves, to form authentic relationships with others and to pursue reasonable expectations. The biggest problem with modern society, as Hardy describes it, is the gap between the promise and the practice of freedom. Society preaches freedom but continually places obstacles in the path of personal development, effectively depriving some of its most promising individuals opportunities for self-development. The tragedy that lies at the very heart of modernity is the battle between so-called social requirements (rule, roles, duties, conventions) and individual liberty. Sometimes these requirements are formal – such as memberships, marriage laws, and institutional regulations – and sometimes they are informal – as in the late Victorian British code of 'respectability'. Both formally and informally, however, modern society attempts to 'trap' individuals into acceptable and socially-stabilizing forms of behavior. Chief among these are marriage and the family.

Leaving aside momentarily the incipient hypocrisy/insincerity of a society that trumpets theoretical freedom while punishing non-conformist behavior, the potential conflict is far worse for some groups than others. Individuals are supposed to be free but some groups of people are much freer than others. The main story of the second half of the nineteenth-century in Britain was the coming together of two socio-economic classes – the aristocracy and the middle class. The old aristocracy whose power base was in land and old money while the new middle class which represented the 'captains of industry' patched up their differences and ran British society as a team. As land became less valuable, aristocratic sons married middle class daughters, injecting new wealth into dilapidated fortunes. Many British aristocrats also began to act more like money managers, investing their wealth in industry or harnessing the resources of their estates. The alliance was rendered much more workable as middle class sons bought their way into elite schools like Eton and Harrow, which acted as conduits to the major

universities Oxford and Cambridge. Latin and Greek were not just the language of the classics; they were a device for connecting and distinguishing the elite.

Upward mobility for the middle classes generated new barriers for the people below them. Whereas traditionally some promising working class villagers were provided with scholarships into the elite schools and universities, entrance into the late nineteenth-century universities became largely a matter of finances or connections. That's Jude's dilemma. He's clearly got the ability and the drive to pursue a university education. But the doors of Christchurch University are 'effectively' closed to him. He so idealistic that only belatedly does he realize that it would have been better for him to go to a big city, apprentice in a business, eventually making enough money to buy his way into university, rather than *wasting* precious time attempting to memorize Latin and Greek classics. Ironically, his love for learning and literature contributes his downfall, since the modern world is based on who you know, not what you know. Sound familiar?

Modernity is often condemned for its excessive focus on reality and resulting lack of idealism. The people who compete and win in modernity are not the people you want to be friends with. Nice guys finish last. However, free individuals always have it in their power to choose the idealistic path. Jude, by temperament, is an idealist; so perhaps is Sue, although she keeps her idealism in check with her cynicism. The fact that Sue and Jude click so well has less to do with their genes and more to do with the fact that they are both sensitive individuals. The most serious drawback and often overlooked drawback of modernity may not be its utilitarianism but that it effectively denies the majority of individuals the possibility of ever reaching them. The result is that too many idealistic and basically very likeable people like Jude end up feeling like failures or fools or both. Jude's alcoholism, for example, is less a personal failing than the result of a system that was always stacked heavily against him. Sue's situation is different. In many respects, she's a much more of a modern type than Jude when she first meets him. She's internalized a great deal of modern literature from her College journalist friend. But all of these emancipated ideas end up adding to her pain, because the practice of the world that she lives in does not conform to the theoretical model advocated by writers like John Stuart Mill.

John Stuart Mill was one of the first writers to openly advocate total freedom for women, but Victorian Britain still subscribed to the doctrine of *separate spheres* in which women were not only inferior to men socially but subjugated to men in the domestic sphere. In John Stuart Mill's theoretical framework, women were every bit the equals of men – and many women now were well educated on the grounds that they were intellectual equals. But when intellect and culture clash, culture usually wins. The primary role and function of women was as wives and mothers in a power relationship that was anything but equal. I don't know if you noticed, but Sue Bridehead – the name is meant to be ironic – is far and away a more modern, independent and vital individual than Jude. She effectively guides the socially conservative Jude into a more modern consciousness. Her tragic downfall is more devastating and in some ways more soul destroying than Jude's. What makes *Jude the Obscure* one of the important early feminist novels is the examination of the ways that the gap between the theory of freedom and the situation of women not only limits their potential but destroys their souls.

## Modern Consciousness

*Jude the Obscure* is a story about a man and a woman in a non-conventional relationship. One of the most unconventional elements of the story line is its transposition of typical gender roles. In many nineteenth-century novels, the male is the more rational while the female is the more sensitive partner in the relationship. While Sue Bridehead is sensitive – she quotes the romantic poetry of Shelley and she mothers ‘Father Time’ – she is more rational than Jude. Jude is so sensitive that he can’t stand to harm any living creature; his emotionalism makes him likeable, but it’s also a character flaw that gets him into a lot of trouble throughout his life. Cunning individuals like Arabella have no compunction about exploiting this weakness. There is a fascinating discussion between Sue and Jude about a hymn that they both like:

“Because what?”

“I am not that sort – quite.”

“Not easily moved?:

“I didn’t quite mean that.”

“Oh, but you are one of that sort, for you are just like me at heart!”

“But not at head.”...

“I suppose because we are both alike, as I said before.”

“Not in our thoughts! Perhaps a little in our feelings.”

“And they rule our thoughts...” (150)

This last comment is by Jude, who most certainly does allow his feelings to rule his thoughts. Chief among those feelings is the desire to improve his mind for the benefit of others. Unlike those engaged in education so that they can get a job, wealth or be respected as successful, Jude intends to live on a portion of what he earns as a scholar or pastor and give the rest away to charity. And we believe him, when he says this.

Large portions of the story are taken up with Jude’s attempt to pursue the career of a scholar at Christminster and, when that fails, with his fallback attempt to become a pastor or minister. These foiled attempts show him to be the quintessential nice guy, but intellectually, he’s a plodder and temperamentally he’s naively conservative, not to mention old-fashioned. Part of his emotionalism is the tendency to fall in love easily, and so first Arabella and then Sue, get in the way of his best-laid plans. Jude’s fate isn’t totally determined by his obscurity in a social system that’s rigged against him, but some – not all – of it is a result of the choices that he makes based on feeling. All that Jude would be without Sue is a naïve nice guy who is shafted by an unfair world. Tragic perhaps, but not very interesting. It is

the relationship with Sue that transforms Jude into a richer, more complex and more compelling modern character.

Sue is a 'freethinker'. She quotes John Stuart Mill; she prefers the secular Greek to religious medieval civilization. But the Greeks are mainly ammunition for illuminating the lack of genuine autonomy that she sees in modern society. 'I've been thinking,' she continued, still in the tone of one brimful of feeling:

"that the social moulds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star patterns. I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson, living a calm wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about, all along, with aberrant passions, and unaccountable antipathies...(152)

The primary 'impulses' that govern Sue are not the same as the sentimental ones that rule Jude. They are the desire to affirm her freedom as a unique individual. What makes Sue a much more interesting and more contemporary character than Jude is her acute awareness of the tension between the individual and society that characterizes modern society. This self and social awareness is inseparable from her experience as a woman in a man's world, but that does not make it any the less remarkable. Only a thoroughly modern individual can *feel* this tension. Most people bury it by conforming. Sue can't do that.

Sue is not only self-aware, but she has the "curious double nature" of someone who recognizes that there are always two sets of rules in modern life – the ones that you create and the ones that society legislates. At first, Jude views her as "ridiculously inconsistent", but slowly comes to realize that there is a method in Sue's madness. Jude suffers because he fails to appreciate the limits that society sets for the unwary individual. Jude is so concerned with the sufferings of all other living beings that he is blind to the reasons behind his own suffering. Sue opens his eyes to the traps set by the values, ideals and rules of the past. Under Sue's tutelage, Jude begins to "part company" with the "doctrines" that formerly ruled his consciousness, including the traditional view of love and marriage that used to haunt his relationship with Sue. (160)

Sue's "logic was extraordinarily compounded" making her appear to be either an "ethereal, fine nerved, sensitive girl" or a totally unstable character, depending upon one's perspective. (163) But it is precisely this compounded intelligence, and not just her beauty, that attracts and holds men like Jude. And let's not forget Richard Phillotson, who never appears to have entertained any notion of unconventionality until he developed a relationship with Sue. Large chunks of the book consist of fascinating discussions between Sue and the men in her life on the important distinction between acting conventionally and choosing freely. Phillotson painfully comes to realize that that the conventional approach to love and marriage makes no sense in a world where individuals are supposed to be free. Although "her exact feelings...are a riddle", her impulse towards autonomy and authenticity ends up transforming his attitude towards modern relationships. (170) "The more I reflect," he says, "the more *entirely* I am on

their side.” Phillotson began his relationship with Sue as an extremely old fashioned schoolteacher; but he concludes his discussion with George Gillingham as a much more modern individual”

I was, and am, the most old-fashioned man in the world on the question of marriage – in fact I had never thought critically about its ethics at all. But certain facts stared me in the face, and I couldn’t go against them. (176)

Revealingly, Phillotson describes his realization that the foundation of modern love must be freedom to choose and freedom to leave as having “out-Sued Sue”.

Whereas others “submit” to social rules and regulations, Sue “kicks” against them all in the name of preserving her independence and choosing freely. Sometimes these rules are structural and at other times cultural; many times the rules are conventional and traditional. Over time many of these rules would become modernized. For example, individuals are much freer to enter into and to leave unhappy marriages than they were in the past. Working people and their children can now go to university. Democracy has resulted, if not in complete economic and social fairness, at least a better deal for the average person. Individuals and groups now have ‘rights’ that allow them to be different as long as they don’t hurt others. We can debate how far these changes have gone, and how far they should go, but that would not get to the heart of the issue. The most serious problem presented by modernity is not just one of updating institutions and culture. Modernity is much more than a debate between conformity and autonomy because modern freedom implies two different attitudes, two different kinds of consciousness. Sue represents one idea of freedom while Arabella symbolizes another.

Arabella is a very modern kind of character with a recognizably modern consciousness. She understands Sue much better than Jude or Phillotson, and confidently says “Ah, yes – you are a oneyer too, like myself” (202) At the Wessex Agricultural Exhibition, and again at the end of the book, it is Arabella who diagnoses Sue in ways that are anything but conventional. But Arabella’s idea of autonomy is to maximize advantage for herself. Whereas Sue wants to protect herself or rebel against what she sees as unnecessary constraints, Arabella always calculates what is most advantageous to herself. A utilitarian modern society is nowhere near as problematic for people like Sue and Jude, as is this cold and calculating attitude. A distinction needs to be made between authenticity and independence. Arabella is very independent; she knows what she wants and she doesn’t care a whit about convention. Arabella’s *friendly* advice to Sue is to marry Jude:

“As for you, I should coax Jude to take me before the parson straight off, and have done with it, if I were in your place, I say it as a friend my dear.”

“He’s waiting to, any day,” returned Sue, with frigid pride.”

“Then let him, in Heaven’s name. Life with a man is more business – like after it, and money matters work better. And then, you see, if you have rows, and he turns you out of doors, you can get the law to protect you, which you can’t otherwise, unless he half-runs you through with a knife, or cracks your noodle with a poker. And if he bolts away

from you – I say it friendly, as woman to woman, for there's never any knowing what a man med do – you'll have the sticks o' furniture, and won't be looked upon as a thief...I advise you to get the business legally done as soon as possible." (201-202)

The primary distinctions here is not only between feeling and calculation, but also between independence and authenticity. Many modern individuals are happy to embrace as much independence as possible, but relatively few want to take the challenge of authenticity. Authenticity always points to the 'content' of freedom and to the self that experiences freedom.

Ironically, authenticity is one of the most attractive characteristics of traditional society. Although the issue of authenticity is rarely discussed or debated, most people in traditional societies really are what they appear to be. The modern world is a world where many people practice inauthenticity; they seek advantage by wearing masks. Being authentic can be dangerous in the modern world, especially for naïve and trusting souls like Jude. But, even more problematic and certainly more profound, is that other obstacle that modernity puts before the authentic self. Sue has to work constantly on discovering exactly who she is in the face of social definitions that are traps. It's one thing to 'kick' against the rules; it's another to discover who you are. No modern individual can completely transcend social definitions. We are, as Sue is described, a 'curious compound'. How can you begin to be true to yourself, let alone engage in authentic relations with others? That's what causes Sue huge problems – she wants *to be true to herself and true to others*. Arabella avoids the problem of authenticity altogether by focusing on individual inputs of pleasure. There is little doubt, for example, that she enjoys sex more than Sue. But sex for Arabella *is* love. Not so Sue.

Lets summarize the modern consciousness that is explored in *Jude the Obscure*, especially as it is demonstrated by the most interesting and complex character – Sue. In the first place, it is autonomy or the ability to *freely choose*. Freedom also implies a second characteristic – independence from the rules, regulations, conventions imposed by society or the cultural standards of a particular civilization. The third and most important characteristic of autonomy – without which the other two ring hollow – is the ability to actualize yourself authentically in the world. That's the most difficult and the most rewarding characteristic of individuality. I suggested that people like Arabella maximize the first two characteristics while dismissing the third. There are more people like Arabella than Sue in the modern world and they are doubly dangerous not only because 1) they tend to argue that their kind of modern consciousness is the only realistic modern consciousness but also because 2) they take a jealous pleasure in undermining authenticity in others. "Silly – fools – like two children," whispers Arabella (222) when she witnesses the authentic relationship that is Jude and Sue at the Wessex Agricultural Fair, before she begins her plot to break it up. Arabella is the villain of *Jude the Obscure*, but she's a fascinatingly modern villain.

### **Modern Love: "Even love may be cruel at times." (179)**

Love and marriage are not the problem in traditional societies that they are in modern society. In many traditional societies, marriages are arranged by parents or significant others. In medieval and early



modern England, for the upper classes, marriage was all about property consolidation and had nothing much to do with love. Aristocrats found love outside marriage with mistresses. Among the lower classes, the more economically efficient nuclear family was already the norm and individuals had considerable choice in the people that they married. Nevertheless, the marriage was not so much a bond between man and woman as an understood *contract* with the community – effectively a marriage between biological necessity and social stability. The widow Edlin represents the traditional English village wisdom on marriage, which is not much:

“What – and ha’n’t ye really done it? Chok’ it all, that I should have lived to see a good old saying like ‘marry in haste and repent at leisure spoiled like this by you two! ‘Tis time I got back again to Marygreen – sakes if tidden –if this is what the new notions be leading us to! Nobody thought o’ being afeard o’ matrimony in my time, not so much else but a cannon-ball or empty cupboard! Why when I and my poor man were married we thought no more o’t than of a game o’ dubs!”

Some marriages obviously were happier than others; but that was largely a game of chance or the luck of the draw. Love was never the critical element in marriage; if anything, sexual attraction was the catalyst, and that was known to fade rather quickly. Much more important and defining the marriage relationship were that a husband should be a ‘good provider’ and the woman should be robust enough for childbirth.

The relation between love and marriage becomes a much more serious matter as we enter the modern period. The relationship is no longer between the marriage partners and the community, but between two freely choosing individuals. Not only marriage, but saying “I love you” becomes a monumentally important decision because you are not only choosing a life companion or “true comrade” but a person who recognizes and affirms your individuality. That’s what it means to say that the two people in a modern marriage are meant to *complete* each other. Now this kind of completing is a highly personal connection that one can never be too careful about. It involves, but transcends: 1) sexual attraction, 2) any roles and duties of husband and wife, and 3) “the question of neighbours and society”. (172) The most critical element in modern love and marriage, and the one that was most lacking in the traditional world, is freedom of choice. But freedom is a difficult principle to practice. And, in practice, the principle of love is often overwhelmed by passion, responsibility and opinion. People obviously make mistakes about love. So freedom of choice must involve a subsidiary principle – freedom to dissolve the union.

*Jude the Obscure* is essentially a novel about modern love. And, since Sue is the most advanced modern type in Hardy’s book, we are going to watch her as she attempts to practice the principle of freely choosing her life’s partner, namely Jude. The recently abandoned Phillotson recognizes the special relationship between Jude and Sue:

“to the best of my understanding it is not an ignoble, merely animal feeling between the two: that is the worst of it, because it makes me think their love will be enduring...” (173)

And from the same source:

“I have been struck with these two facts: the extraordinary sympathy, or similarity, between them. He is her cousin, which perhaps accounts for some of it. They seem to be one person split in two.” (171)

Even a jealous Arabella is forced to observe:

That complete mutual understanding, in which every glance and movement was as effectual as speech for conveying intelligence between them, made them almost the two parts of a single whole. (217)

All of this reads like a contemporary love story with a happy ending. We all like happy endings. But that's hardly the story of modern love. Don't you just know it's all going to end tragically. It's going to end tragically, because it is so difficult for love to prevail over those 3 things that it modern love should transcend and several additional things as well. First, Jude's sensuality is not so easily transcended. He sleeps with his ex wife. It's not clear that he can be trusted, especially if he drinks. Second, Sue reacts to what she perceives as Jude's breach of trust by entering into an ill-fated marriage with Phillotson, which is a marriage of duty rather than love. Third, the special relationship between Sue and Jude is threatened on all sides by malicious gossip even in a big town like Aldbrickham, where Sue and Jude hoped to be anonymous. Also, it's going to end tragically because no matter how hard Sue and Jude try to be modern individuals they are still vulnerable human beings. Their love can't always transcend the push of passion or the pull of convention.

The fact that she will be totally defeated in the end does not lessen Sue's heroism in the modern reader's eyes; it merely makes her a tragic heroine and forces us to confront the tensions between flesh and spirit, freedom and constraint, authenticity and respectability. It also addresses another contemporary issue -- the complex relationship between sorrow and happiness in the modern world. Jude says to Sue:

“I wish you were happy, whatever I may be!”

Sue replies:

“I *can't* be! So few could enter into my feelings – they would say 'twas my fanciful fastidiousness, or something of that sort, and condemn me...It is none of the natural tragedies of love that's love's usual tragedy in civilized life, but a tragedy artificially manufactured for people who in a natural state would find relief in parting!...It would have been wrong, perhaps, for me to tell my distress to you, if I had been able to tell it to anybody else. But I have nobody. And I must tell somebody! (160)

Sue, of course, is talking about her unhappy marriage to Phillotson. But the larger issue here is that the more Sue strives to be a freely choosing individual, the more alienated she feels from the rest of society. Jude is the only person she can be truly open and authentic with. Making the right love bond is so much more important for recognizably modern individuals because authentic individuals are always out of touch with the society that they live in. But even if you make the right choice, true love will never be 'they lived happily ever after' because love is a work in progress between two different individuals. There is always a chance that, as people, grow, they may grow apart.

The clearest message in *Jude the Obscure* is that people in unhappy marriages should be allowed to divorce, not only legally, but without social censure. Sue aka Thomas Hardy seems to believe that future generations will be more understanding about failed marriage than his contemporaries, who decried the book as an attack on the sanctity of marriage. Sue says

"I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one has done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women, only they submit and I kick. When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what *will* they say?" (180)

But Hardy goes much further than advocating easy divorce. Through Sue, and occasionally Jude, he interrogates the entire validity of the marriage institution for the modern age. Marriage is attacked on a number of grounds simultaneously. First, it "squashes up and digests" a person's individuality in its "vast maw". (141) Second, marriage parades as a religious ceremony, but it really is "only a sordid contract, based on material convenience in householding, rating and taxing, and the inheritance of land and money by children..." (156) Third, marriage completely negates a voluntary relationship based on trust, twisting what should be given freely and continuously into an oath and a life sentence". (193) Once obedience to a contract and oath is legislated, people are bound to feel trapped. Sue jokes that there would be more "loving couples" if marriage prohibited them from living together.

Marriage as a contract or oath contravenes the ruling passion of modernity – the desire for freedom – for both partners. But if marriage is a trap for men, it is a double trap for women. Not only does it expressly enjoin women to 'obey' their husband, but all the economic and social conventions connected marriage bend women to their husband's will. Sue is fearful, with good reason, that marriage will do one of two things. Either it will make Jude think of her as his property, or it will result in her being taken for granted. A large part of *Jude the Obscure* is Sue putting off marriage to Jude. That might not trouble many of Hardy's readers. What was shocking to contemporaries was that Jude and Sue *never* marry. After wishing and hoping that Sue will consent to marry him, Jude eventually comes to a similar conclusion as her. They almost marry when Arabella enters the scene and frightens Sue into finally saying *I love you* and agreeing to post the bans of marriage. But Jude eventually recognizes that this admission and agreement was based on a fear of losing each other rather than the relationship of a *comrade*. It is only when Sue and Jude give up on marriage altogether that their relationship takes flight.

Hardy interrogates the institution of marriage in ways that are way ahead of his time and even our time. If modern love is a relationship built on genuine affection and trust, rather than simply respect or respectability, Hardy suggests that marriage now becomes a problem. Affection and trust are conditional on freedom, but marriage puts conditions on freedom. Marriage is a contract and a legal obligation, however much you attempt to alter the terms of endearment. It runs completely contrary to freedom, which allows no external imperative or constraint. Some marriages in the past were obviously *happier* than others, but modern marriage sets up the individual for additional and unnecessary unhappiness by putting obligation and freedom on a collision course. In a fascinating discussion between Jude and Sue, the latter says:

“Jude, do you think that when you *must* have me with you by law, we shall be so happy as we are now? The men and women of our family are very generous when everything depends upon their goodwill, but they always kick against compulsion. Don’t you dread the attitude that insensibly arises out of legal obligation? Don’t you think it is destructive to a person whose essence is in gratuitousness?” (203)

If the essence of love is freedom of choice, isn’t continuing freedom essential to loving? Sue and Jude are not always happy, but they are *happier* than most married couples. Is it because, as Hardy suggests, that maintain their freedom? Sue is miserable when she feels pressured to marry Jude, but her cheerfulness returns when that pressure is removed:

By degrees sue acquired her lover’s cheerfulness at the sense of freedom, and proposed that they should take a walk in the fields, even if they had to put up with a cold dinner on account of it. Jude agreed and Sue went upstairs and prepared to start, putting on a joyful coloured gown in observance of her liberty, seeing which Jude put on a lighter tie. (192)

Sue’s freedom certainly is crucial to her loving Jude, but the more conservative Jude also benefits by being in a happier relationship. People may think they want the stability, security, and ‘commitment’ of marriage, but does all that contribute to greater unhappiness? Sue refers to getting married as “killing our dream” (215). Could she be right? Sue and Jude genuinely “liked to be together” (226); might marriage change that for many modern people?

*Jude the Obscure* not only advocates easy divorce but also questions the relevance of marriage for emancipated modern men and women. It separates love from marriage. That’s why the book was so controversial when it came out in the 1890s and why it is so fascinating to read today. Today’s readers are likely to be more sympathetic to Sue’s position perhaps but some new issues arise from challenging marriage as an institution. One issue involves sexuality. Sexuality is an important theme in the novel and one that demands a lecture on its own. For us, it is important to note that institutionalizing marriage is society’s way of controlling and channeling the sexual impulse. If love is free, then sexual love becomes much more complicated. Hardy makes a clear distinction between spiritual love and sensuality. The relationship between Sue and Jude is overwhelming a relationship of spirit or mental

connection in freedom. How does that change the attitude towards infidelity? Ostensibly, Jude is unfaithful in the flesh, but not in spirit. He is not unfaithful in what really counts for a relationship, although Sue is adamant that she would *never* have done such a thing. But isn't she *unfaithful* to her love by marrying Phillotson, who she remarries at the end of the book incidentally.

Although it's not part of this book, and would have prevented *Jude the Obscure* being published at all in 1890, Hardy's definition of love as a spiritual connection has consequences for other kinds of non-conventional relationships. Homosexuality was fairly common among the middle and upper classes because adolescent boys were thrown together in boarding schools and university colleges. Relationships between adult males, apart from sexual liaisons, often were close. By defining marriage overwhelmingly as a spiritual liaison, Hardy opens the door to gay relationships generally. Love for Arabella is overwhelmingly heterosexual. Love for Sue downplays sexuality. She is described as a tomboy. When she runs away from the Normal School, she ends up wearing Jude's clothing and being indistinguishable from a man. She's also the more rational and reasoning individual in her relationships with men. None of this is conclusive, of course, but it does show that, once you problematize traditional marriage, other kinds of relationships are on the table.

Another issue that arises when you delegitimize marriage is -- what now becomes of the family? The issues that the right wing of the Republican Party in the U.S. is currently raising about the family were raised already in *Jude the Obscure*. It is one thing to say that marriage is making more people unhappy than is necessary; it's altogether another to consider what becomes of children if you decide to make divorce easy or abolish marriage altogether. It shows how serious Hardy is about challenging the institution of marriage that tackles this issue both implicitly and explicitly. Sue and Jude are *better* parents than most married couples, and certainly than Arabella and her Australian husband. Traditionally, parents are expected to raise their *own* children, but Sue takes in 'Father Time' even though his parentage is debatable and he is certainly not Sue's biological child. Jude and Sue are sensitive caring individuals and the ideal kind of parents. Their family includes two biological children but is not dependent upon biology. 'Father Time' gets as much love as Sue and Jude can give him, and he desperately needs it, given that the weight of the world seems to rest upon his little shoulders.

'Father Time' brings Sue and Jude closer together, whereas for many modern people a challenging child might tear their relationship apart. By the point when 'Father Time' has been introduced to their family, Jude has become almost as liberated as Sue. Here's a fascinating exchange between the pair:

"The poor child seems to be wanted by nobody!" Sue replied, and her eyes filled. (205)

Jude had by this time come to himself. "What a view of life he must have, mine or not mine!" he said, "I must say that, if I were better off, I should not stop for a moment to think whose he might be. I would take him and bring him up. The beggarly question of parentage -- what is it, after all? What does it matter, when you come to think of it, whether a child is yours by blood or not? All the little ones of our time are collectively the children of us adults of the time, and entitled to our general care. That excessive

regard of parents for their own children, and their dislike of other people's, is, like class-feeling, patriotism, save-your-own-soulism, and other virtues, a mean exclusiveness at bottom."

Sue jumped up and kissed Jude with passionate devotion. "Yes – so it is, dearest! And we'll have him here! And if he isn't yours it makes it all the better. I do hope he isn't.."

Why does Sue *hope he isn't*? She's consistently living out her idea of freedom. It's better to parent out of fellow feeling rather than a sense of duty. Jude's speech on parenting goes beyond a critique of the oppression that is the conventional marriage and family and suggests a re-evaluation of community generally.

### **Modern Woman**

Throughout this lecture, I've suggested that Sue is far and away the most modern individual in this novel. She's a tragic hero because, even though she gets the men in her life on her side, and even though she pioneers an unmarried relationship, in the end she can't defeat social conventions and cultural norms. Hardy could have made Sue and Jude live relatively happy ever after but it wouldn't have left his readers with the right message – modern society is unjust, hypocritical and insincere in its treatment of the most evolved, progressive and authentic individuals. For that message to really hit home, Jude will have to die and a chastened Sue will return to Phillotson. It's tragic that society does this to individuals. It's tragic that the modern world is so unnecessarily cruel. It's tragic that genuine people don't have a chance to happy on their own terms.

However, prior to Sue's tragic demise, resulting from 'Father Times' suicide and murder of her other two children, Sue is a feminist hero. She creates a new role for herself as a woman and, by implication, a new role for women generally. Feminism had yet to begin as a movement, although there were feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft from the 1780s on. When it did begin in earnest in the 1900s, women focused on equality of education, voting, and careers in a world dominated by men. The suffragette movement encapsulated the kind of goals that modern women aimed at. *Jude the Obscure's* female protagonist is involved in none of these things. She hasn't got much of a career; she's largely a caregiver in a supportive role; and she's even more *obscure* than Jude. But might have been possible to call the novel *Sue the Obscure* were it not for the fact that she is such a force as an individual in her own right. Arguably, you can have all the votes, educational choices and career options that you want, without being the kind of emancipated person that Sue is.

Despite all the descriptions of Sue as a Tomboy and a man in drag, she is a woman and she's a very self-conscious woman. She has a distinctly female sensitivity, if there is such a thing, that she has to work to control. The problem that many women like Sue faced (and still face) is that they become more dependent upon men when they display feminine traits. Sue can only be fully herself as a woman when she completely trusts Jude, and that is only when Jude allows her to be herself. Jude needs to give Sue her independence in return for her love. During most of the novel, when he still thinks in terms of male domination – "the little bird is caught at last" (200) – Sue can't give herself to him. While Sue does make

serious mistakes – i.e. marrying Phillotson and almost marrying Jude – she does not relinquish her independence and recovers from those mistakes. And she does this in the face of enormous pressure – from males and from society. How she does this is as interesting as the fact that she does it. At times, Sue has virtually no support and almost no one that she can talk to. “I have nobody but you,” she says to Jude, “and no body to defend me”. (194) For the most part, her struggle for independence is internal and also with herself. She typically ends up being true to herself and her emancipated values, despite constantly describing herself as *wicked* or as a *coward*. (156-8, 165, 169, 189)

The males in her life view Sue alternately as an “ethereal, fine-nerved, sensitive” creature or a “phantasmal bloodless creature” (162, 194) depending on whether they are focused on her ideally or in terms of their male needs. It must be admitted that Hardy himself is constructing something of a male fantasy in his creation. What redeems Hardy’s description of Sue, however, is the fact that she is allowed to express her own thoughts and, at least equally important, her feelings. Illuminating the important difference between her marriage to Phillotson and Jude’s liaison with Arabella, Hardy describes Sue’s reaction:

Slipping down on her knees, Sue buried her face in the bed and wept.

“I never knew such an unreasonable – such a dog-in-the-manger feeling,” said Jude. “I am not to approach you, nor anybody else!”

“Oh, don’t you *understand* my feeling! *Why* don’t you! *Why* are you so gross! I jumped out of the window!”

“Jumped out of window?”

“I can’t explain!”

It was true that he did not understand her feelings very well...

In the 1890s, there was medical term applied to women who jumped out of bedroom windows or hid in staircase closets – *hysteria*. Female hysteria was a disease to be treated. If nothing else, Sue provides readers with a human face and a rationale for this kind of behavior, namely women coerced into loveless marriages. Sue uses *jumping out a window* to show Jude that love is a mental rather than a sexual relationship. “I jumped out of the window!” becomes a blow for female emancipation.

*Jude the Obscure* was written by a man, but that does not make its treatment of female sexuality any less interesting. Sue appears sexless to the men in her life, even for a long time to Jude. But the battleground between sex and love is obviously one that modern women need to traverse. Sue clearly does have sexual feelings. She’s made the terrible mistake of marrying Phillotson – towards whom she has no sexual feelings whatsoever:

“What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is morally! – the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a

matter whose essence is its voluntariness....I wish he would beat me, or be faithless to me, or do some open thing that I could talk about as a justification for feeling as I do! (158)

On the other hand, when she *kisses* Jude, the man that she really loves, the experience is tumultuous:

Both had looked round simultaneously. That look behind was fatal to the reserve hitherto more or less maintained. They had quickly run back, and met, and embracing most unpremeditatedly, kissed close and long. When they parted for good it was with flushed cheeks on her side, and a beating heart on his. (161)

Sue is perfectly right, however, in viewing sexual attraction as a dangerous snare. It is not just because sex is different from, and inferior to, a love that is spiritual or mental. What she needs is a relationship that accepts and affirms her independence. Now, you might say that Sue could have casual sex with Jude. They could, in modern terminology, be friends with benefits. Leaving aside the fact that we live in different times than the 1890s, Sue knows that the men in her life don't just want sex from her; they want to love her. She's also afraid that they want to possess and dominate her. That's why Sue wants to be sure that her lover's kisses mean something different. Before the first aborted marriage attempt with Jude, she says:

"Jude, I want you to kiss me, as a lover, incorporeally," she said, tremulously reaching up to him, with damp lashes. "It won't be ever like this any more, will it! I wish we hadn't begun the business". (212)

Jude is as confused about Sue's sexuality as he sometimes appears. What perplexes him is that she can be so affectionate sometimes and so distant when he comes on too strong. Yet another fascinating discussion begins with Jude calling Sue a "flirt":

There was a momentary pause, till she suddenly jumped up, and to his surprise he saw by the kettle-flame that her face was flushed.

"I can't talk to you any longer, Jude!" she said, the tragic contralto note having come back as of old. "It is getting too dark to stay together like this...We mustn't sit and talk in this way any more. Yes – you must go away, for you mistake me! I am very much the reverse of what you say so cruelly – Oh, Jude, it *was* cruel to say that! Yet I can't tell you the truth – I should shock you by letting you know how I give way to my impulses, and how much I feel that I shouldn't have been provided with attractiveness, unless it were meant to be exercised! Some women's love of being loved is insatiable; and so, often, it is their love of loving; and in the last case they may find that they can't give it continuously to the chamber-officer appointed by the bishop's licence to receive it. But you are so straightforward Jude, that you can't understand me!" (152)



What Sue is describing more straightforwardly than she thinks, and what she absolutely refuses to be sorry for, is the desire of women to attract love, to be loved. She admits that this feminine desire sometimes leads her and others to make serious mistakes about marriage partners, but the mistake is more often the result of misguided feelings of guilt or social pressures than natural inclination. In any case, you learn from your mistakes. Sue is not going to be guilted into marrying Jude because she does not want marriage to ruin a spiritual relationship. “I resolved to trust you,” she says, “to set my wishes above your gratification.” (180)

Some of the ‘relationship’ conversations between Sue and Jude may seem artificial. Who really talks like that with so many exclamation marks (!)? But we need to cut Hardy some slack. He’s trying to get at what goes on in modern relationships, and that’s not always easy to put into words. Also, articulating a female point of view that largely has been missing from literature – especially the literature of intimate daily life – is a real challenge. I find Sue sometimes believable and sometimes not so much. One reviewer of *Jude the Obscure* suggested that dialogue written by a woman might read more authentic than Hardy’s exchanges. Personally, however, I find Sue a more believable and interesting character than Jude. Whatever your opinion, the one thing that Sue represents is a feminist attack on the Victorian idea of what constitutes respectability and a proper woman’s place in that respectable world. Sue out and out rejects Victorian marriage as a bad deal for men but a terrible sacrifice for women. Witnessing a respectable church wedding, Sue suggests that “The flowers in the bride’s hand are sadly like the garland which decked the heifers of sacrifice in old times!” (215) When Phillotson lectures her on her lack of respectability, Sue responds:

I know you mean my good. But I don’t want to be respectable! To produce “Human development in its richest diversity” (to quote your Humboldt) is to my mind far above respectability. No doubt my tastes are low – in your view – hopelessly low! (168)

Hardy’s condemnation of Victorian society’s culture of conformity could not be more devastating. Many people paid a price for that conformity, but women paid most dearly.

### **A Critique of Victorian Civilization**

Hardy’s criticism of Victorian civilization was not confined to its treatment of women or workers. As Kathryn laid out for you, Victorian scientism, utilitarianism, and Social Darwinism constructed a world that was unimaginative, inhumane and narrowly conceived. Individualism should lead to the “richest diversity” of species life, not the success of the Isabella’s from every class. The main message of *Jude the Obscure* is to remove the structural and cultural impediments to personal freedom. Allow people to divorce more easily and encourage writers to discuss modern relationships more sincerely. It bothered Hardy that writers shied away from discussing the marital problems that most people were experiencing, on the grounds that free discussion would harm social values and institutions like marriage and the family.

There is an undercurrent of pessimism in the novel that continually intrudes upon Hardy’s message. As symbolized by ‘Father Time’, the upcoming generations might be soured on life and relationships. In the

past, culture and civilization might have helped individuals find a meaning in their lives. Modern culture not only got in the way of finding a meaning for people like Jude and Sue, but it offered no satisfying meanings other than, say, the survival of the fittest. And the idea of the 'fittest' was so narrowly conceived as to be unsatisfying, even to the successful. Arabella is a survivor of modernity, but she is totally jaded to anything apart from her immediate pleasure.

One of the saddest episodes in the book is about a popular hymn entitled 'The Foot of the Cross'. It doesn't matter if you are religious – Sue is not – what matters is the beauty of the hymn. It touched Jude and Sue's sensitive hearts. Jude made a special train trip to meet the hymn's composer. But the man who wrote such a touching tune is bitter because there's *no money in hymn writing*. Jude says to him:

"And we have this week practiced 'The Foot of the Cross', which I understand, sir, that you composed?"

"I did – a year or so ago."

"I – like it. I think it supremely beautiful!"

"Ah well – other people have said so too. Yes, there's money in it, if I could only see about getting it published. I have other compositions to go with it, too, I wish I could bring them out; for I haven't made a five-pound note out of any of them yet...But music is a poor staff to lean on – I am giving it up entirely. You must go into trade if you want to make money nowadays. The wine business is what I am thinking of. This is my forthcoming list – it is not issued yet – but you can take one."

He handed Jude an advertisement list of several pages in booklet shape...(145)

Modern civilization only values what is economically marketable. The reason that the episode is so sad is not because writing hymns makes no money, but because the composer devalues the hymn *in his own mind* because it doesn't bring in cash. Modern society has a tendency to devalue the things that, in our hearts and mind, we value the most.

On the other hand, most of us are not trapped, at least not to the extent that people like Sue and Jude were. Jude and Sue still choose freedom until the world came crashing down on them. We have more freedom than them to choose. We can choose to live authentic lives and pursue things that give our spirits pleasure, rather than merely fatten our wallets. Being realistic doesn't mean having to sacrifice what's *really* important in life and relationships. Or are we passing the point of no return and manufacturing what Sue was afraid of – "a future with shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied". (215)

## Wuthering Heights (I)

### The Context

*Wuthering Heights* was written by Emily Bronte in 1846 and published in 1847. It was edited by her sister Charlotte Bronte and republished in 1850 with the Charlotte Bronte preface that is typically attached to most future editions. The 'massaging' by the author of *Jane Eyre* is significant both directly and indirectly. Charlotte wanted to 'polish' the language, and by implication I think, the *wildness* of the original version. She was far too faithful to her sister's legacy to do much more than change the formal idiom of Emily's novel. But in the preface, she simultaneously defends her sister's forceful prose and brilliance while apologizing for *Wuthering Heights'* lack of sophistication and refinement. In other words, the book was far too rude for Charlotte Bronte and most of her Victorian contemporaries. It would be accurate to suggest that the book 'scared' them, not merely because of its titillating suggestion that the ghosts of the dead can still walk among us, but mainly because of its moral ambiguity. Do we dare, for example, identify with Heathcliff and Catherine, at the risk of relinquishing not merely civilization and courtesy, but also such good Victorian values as *pity* and *duty*.

The Heathcliff and Catherine of *Wuthering Heights* are not the tamed versions of those characters in the movie of the same name. Do not watch the movie! Emily Bronte's Heathcliff is demonic rather than sympathetic. He's dark from the very beginning of the novel. He doesn't care for anybody except Catherine and at least for a time Ellen or Nelly who nursed him through illness. He doesn't even show love to old Earnshaw who saved him from the Liverpool slums and who might conceivably be the boy's father. He's dark, hard, uncaring and vengeful – right from the beginning. In addition to forgetting the sanitized version the Laurence Olivier represented, you would also have a hard time doing the modern excuse that Heathcliff is a victim of his harsh environment. That he is a victim is an undoubted fact, but Emily Bronte never suggests that the harsh treatment of the boy and man is the only reason why he is the way he is. He's given lots of chances to redeem himself as his fortunes increase. He turns out to be mean spirited and cruel. His perceived *betrayal* by Catherine acts to reinforce his vengeful nature but is not the ultimate cause of it. And he only gives over his vengeance and cruelty when it becomes personally worthless to him. Heathcliff is not loveable. To love him would be a very serious mistake, as the infatuated Isabella discovers to her ruin. The only one who can love him with *relative* safety is Catherine. And she goes nuts!

Why create such an unlovable character and make him the focus of what clearly is a love story? The reasons may be partly biographical but they are not easy to discover. Emily Bronte, together with her two sisters Anne and Charlotte, and their much loved brother Branwell, were the well educated children of a Yorkshire parson. Although highly precocious, the family was provincial and the children tended to live in their shared imaginations. Branwell was the centre and focus of this imaginative realm but, like a character in *Wuthering Heights*, Linton, proved sickly and incapable of doing the great things as a writer that were anticipated of him. His three sisters, however, proved to be much more capable as novelists, and all were obsessed with recapturing the astonishing power of that original brother/sister relationship.

The author of *Jane Eyre* was the most intimate with Branwell, but Emily nursed him towards the end of his life and died herself of tuberculosis (the disease that takes Linton) shortly thereafter. The intensity of this brother sister relationship reverberates throughout *Wuthering Heights* and explains several of its major dynamics. The first of these is the closed universe of relationships in the novel. Most those who fall in love or marry are all either closely related by birth or by membership in the family. Thus, for example, Heathcliff is the foster brother, and perhaps even the real brother of Catherine. The Lintons at Thrushcross Grange will add new genetic material to the Earnshaws at Wuthering Heights, but that injection will eventually result in cousins marrying. Indeed, this closed world of relationships is highly incestuous. Even Nelly (Ellen Dean) could conceivably be the daughter of the old patriarch Earnshaw, since she's raised as one of the children. Into this relatively closed circle comes an outsider called Lockwood who could conceivably open up the universe of relationships to a wider world. Nelly views him as a potential savior of Cathy the daughter of Catherine who is under Heathcliff's thumb. But what is interesting is that Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights close in upon themselves and Cathy will eventually marry her cousin Heron.

Incest may seem a strong term, but characters resemble one another and relationships parallel each other in this closed world that Lockwood initially finds attractive but eventually has no ability to belong to. Emily Brontë was well educated, possibly the *cleverest* of the Brontë sisters; she taught in Brussels; but she retreated to the closed world of home. The relationship with her brothers and sisters and to *home* in the Yorkshire moors was far more important to her, even than success as an author. Another way of putting this is that, for Emily especially, childhood, siblings and home were the closest thing to paradise for the Brontës. The distance between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights were physical symbols of the narrow comfort zone that Emily Brontë wanted to tread. What makes Emily Brontë a great author is her appreciation of the depth and complexity of this confined emotional universe. Lockwood, a very untrustworthy narrator, wants to picture the Yorkshire moors and the inhabitants as pastoral or romantic recluses. But Emily Brontë discovers a pitched emotional battleground as scarily wild as the wuthering winds and as culturally pretentious as the civilized grange. The tensions between the grange and the heights arguably constitute the modern emotional universe.

### **The Web of Childhood**

*Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* affirm "exactly contrary entities" according to the literary critic U.C. Knoepfelmacher (98). What he means is that, while Charlotte Brontë wanted to affirm the civilized, social power of her protagonist Jane Eyre, Emily Brontë is much more interested in "primitive or asocial power". The strength of *Wuthering Heights*, and what distressed Charlotte Brontë about her sister's novel, is that it refuses to condemn and even celebrates love that is wild, ungovernable to the point of being grotesque. Charlotte Brontë's protagonist eventually obtains social power and control over her maimed male counterpart, something that gives *Jane Eyre* a distinctly feminist quality. Power operates very differently in *Wuthering Heights*. While both Heathcliff and Catherine exhibit oodles of will power, and real control over spouses and others, the most meaningful relationship that dominates their consciousness is one that is free, spontaneous and distinctly marked by a "abdication of power," especially on Heathcliff's part. How Catherine and Heathcliff arrived at this ideal type of relationship is unclear. When Heathcliff first arrives, and Catherine doesn't get her promised whip from 'papa', she

can't stand the gypsy urchin. Yet just a few weeks later, Nelly tells us that the two children are inseparable. In most novels, this unexplained change of affection might appear to be a weakness. But how does one explain the magic of a soul to soul connection like that between Catherine and Heathcliff without 'socializing' it? And that is precisely what Emily Bronte does not want to do.

On the face of it, their situation would seem to be far from ideal. Their union is disapproved of by Hindley, the sanctimonious Joseph, and by Nelly. Heathcliff is protected by old Earnshaw but only for as long as he lives, which is not going to be for very long. Some of the situations are contrived to increase our sympathy with Catherine and Heathcliff, not as individuals but as a team, but the underlying message is that forces are always at work to mould the primitive, natural and powerful emotions of the child into the value system of society and civilization. To view these 'forces' solely in terms of the raw power of socialization is misleading. As brutish as Hindley is, as hell-fearing as Joseph is, and as relentlessly common-sensical as Nelly is, they are no match for Catherine and Heathcliff's mutual joy in scampering about the moors. It may seem terrible when Joseph tears down the pinafores that Catherine and Heathcliff pin together to create a fortress of play, but such attacks can be laughed off. What civilized society, as represented by the Grange, effects is much more insidious. It achieves by 'art' what could never be achieved by mere 'force' (51) Catherine is transformed from a child into a 'lady' by a combination of praise and rewards. In *Wuthering Heights*, the innocent affections of childhood are also thwarted by an patently unfair class system that divides childhood friends into separate spheres. Catherine, who like many women, is socialized earlier than her male friend and forced to choose between spheres, finds herself confronted by social norms. What makes Catherine so very interesting as a protagonist is that she refuses the *either/or* choice of dutiful wife and passionate person. She attempts to juggle both worlds, socialized Grange and primitive Heights, by the sheer force of her indomitable will. Needless to say, it will drive her to madness.

Catherine is the central protagonist in Volume I of *Wuthering Heights* just as her daughter Cathy will be in Volume II. She is not always entirely believable as a person in a novel so concerned with the "web of childhood", but Emily Bronte spends a lot of time unpacking her character, especially her strong will and affirmation of herself as a person rather than simply a social role player. Heathcliff is much more of a symbol and metaphor for primitive power; neither the other characters in the novel nor the reader is ever going to know him as a *person*. What is fascinating about him is his virtually complete rejection of all social norms except the intense bond of friendship that he exhibits for Catherine. Even this *friendship*, however, needs to be qualified because Heathcliff is anything but what we think of as a good friend in normal social terms. Nelly, who acts as the Greek common sense chorus in this tragedy, constantly accuses Heathcliff of making things worse for Catherine and everyone else connected to her. "Who and *what* is Heathcliff?" is a question asked by Nelly and Isabella, and by the reader. The clearest answer that can be given is that Heathcliff is the personification of "animated desire" – the desire for union and, when separated from that union, for *revenge* on everyone that gets in the way. He is clearly a romantic figure, not in terms of the typical romantic cliché, but in terms of the romantic types prefigured by Milton's *Satan* or the suffering monster in *Frankenstein*.

Heathcliff is so one-dimensional that he is only *interesting* to the reader because of the intensity of his love for Catherine. He is true to that childhood love in making Catherine the absolute centre of him

emotional universe, but he typically mistakes or misreads the value of that love. He first misreads Catherine's choice of Edgar Linton as a sign or signal that she loves him less (instead of differently); when he becomes aware of that mistake, he continues to confuse cause and effect by seeking to punish all those who he thinks have deprived, usurped, sullied or transgressed his personal proprietorship of Catherine. As for Catherine, she simply cannot understand why Heathcliff can't simply accept the social status quo because he alone has access to her innermost soul. Heathcliff is not completely characterless to the extent he grows in understanding towards the end of the novel. This growth is still metaphorical, however, because what Heathcliff is really doing is shaking off the "rigid identities" that have been constructed by the adult and socialized world, and returning to/reaffirming the *essential* relationship that he had with Catherine in his childhood. That's why he's going to die with a smile on his face – a demonic smile.

Heathcliff's death wish is a return to childhood. Later in the course, we'll see Freud will make much of the importance of childhood and infancy, highlighting the complex and difficult transition to adulthood that causes many to lament the loss of union with the mother or the brother or sister. A Freudian interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* certainly is possible, but a simpler and more straightforward explanation of Emily Brontë's novel is that civilization tends to destroy something very valuable in essential unity of the child, quite apart from kinship/friendship connections that gets undermined by role players in society.

### **Romantic Love**

The answer and antidote to superficial stereotypical living according to the Romantics was *passion*. Passionate love between two complementary human beings revitalizes the self and brings it back to a something approaching a state of unity. But romantic writers tended to be divided on the possibility and potential for love in modern society. Moreover, romantic writers tended to vacillate between optimism about love's promise and pessimism about whether or not that promise was likely to be realized. Especially as the nineteenth-century wore on, and conflict and competition became the dominant norms, romantic writers projected love backwards, forwards and sideways – anywhere but in present. The increasing fascination with ghostly lovers only partly reflected the romantic desire to give readers a *thrill* and force them to feel something, if only fear. It also established an *uncanny* space where love might escape increasingly rigid social norms. The end of *Wuthering Heights* pits that scary place against a more conventional loving relationship and forces readers to choose between the restless dead and the complacent living.

Ghostly lovers certainly have a central place in *Wuthering Heights*. What most interests me about these ghostly apparitions is just how sexless they are. Arguably, sex is everywhere in the novel, as suggested by the pervading theme of incest. But if this is the case, then sexuality is assumed rather than articulated, and the novel's diffusions of brotherly-sisterly love speak to the androgynous and polymorphous love of the infant rather than the adolescent or adult. In any case, while there is a great deal of passion in the novel, sexual culmination is strangely missing. Now, you suggest that this was a novel written just as puritanical Victorianism was taking over British culture. So, we should not expect anything like the explicit sexuality of Schlegel's *Lucinde*. Maybe, but what clearly is in the novel is a lot of violence, such

equally unrefined. Indeed, *Wuthering Heights* was savaged by critics for its crudity and primitiveness, so what would it have hurt to include a little sex? The reason that there is no sex in this novel about passionate love must be because sexuality is a secondary consideration. The primary consideration is the union of two kindred spirits in an unsocialized Edenic childhood.

Eroticism need not be dominated by sensuality. Suppressed desire is usually reflected in dreams, so it may be informative to explore the two dreams that Lockwood has near the beginning of the novel and that frame everything that follows. Both dreams deeply disturb Lockwood, so we have to take both of them equally seriously, even if one of them contains humorous content. The first dream centres on a sermon by James Branderham that was one of the books Catherine wrote in as a child. The dream has this fulminating pulpit orator denouncing 77 possible sins and the sinners who commit them. Lockwood forges an alliance with Catherine as a child by poking fun at the sermon and the sermonizer for being boring. This causes a commotion in the church with old Joseph taking the side of the pastor and attacking Lockwood as the chief among sinners. At first this seems dangerous, since everyone is out to get Lockwood, but it soon deteriorates into a farce because everyone is hitting everyone else. It's a silly farce, so why is Lockwood so relieved when the dream is over?

The second dream was far more 'disturbing', which is not to suggest that the first dream wasn't troubling. Here, however, we can see more reasons for being disturbed. Catherine's waif-like ghost is trying to get in out of the cold. Lockwood's response is one of absolute terror – of a child seeking help! – and he resorts to extreme behavior by rubbing the child's arm against the glass, which results in pools of blood on the dreamscape bedsheets. Since that doesn't work, he lies to the helpless ghost, telling her to let go and then he'll let her in. Of course, he doesn't let the child in. He closes the window as quickly as he can and seeks to return to normal life, which turns out to be doing his morning wash up and annoying Heathcliff with his inane conversation. What can all of this mean? It must mean something more than setting up Heathcliff's "gush of grief" (29). Lockwood has been given the opportunity to get in touch with his inner child in both dreams. In the first dream, he's a potential ally with Catherine in her natural antipathy to being bored to death by Joseph and his books. In the second, he's invited to bring his own personal Catherine in from the cold. In both cases, he refuses. What Lockwood appears to be is an adolescent who wants love and connection, but is afraid of it. Because he's afraid of loving, all of his romantic posturing is artificial. He constantly claims to want to avoid society and find resources within himself but he obviously lacks any depth of soul. He's bewitched by Catherine's daughter and Heathcliff's daughter-in-law, but he has no character to match hers.

A particular view of modern love is emerging here. The idea is of a soul-to-soul acceptance that is more common in childhood, with all its demonic uncontrolled behaviours, than in a repressed adulthood. Many romantics projected their fascination with childhood into adult relationships. This childlike relationship between two lovers did not appear suddenly on the scene, but in writers like Emily Brontë **true love now becomes a union of souls that should not be submerged by adult roles and responsibilities.** Indeed, as the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff underlines, adult roles and responsibilities are more often inimical than complementary to the fundamental bond. The point is to retain the child and to be childlike in one's attitude towards the other. That is an extremely difficult load for love to bear, so it should not be surprising that many romantics were pessimistic about the

possibility of finding and keeping a soul mate. Adult life must always involve a *fall* from Edenic childhood. Even in good relationships, adult responsibilities are forever separating would-be soul mates. We are always projecting love backwards into its childlike beginnings rather than forward into mature relationships. We count on and live off the intensity of the more innocent and spontaneous connection. But as Catherine and Heathcliff's experience seems to indicate, it is impossible to sustain anything like that kind of union in the normal world. The Josephs will always be pulling down the protective pinafores.

The pessimistic romantics sought, but deplored of finding a soul-to-soul connection that went beyond the sexual. Just how far beyond the sexual did it go? Consider how impoverished Hindley's love for his tuberculosis ridden Frances appears beside that of Heathcliff and Catherine. The fact that he drinks himself to death after Frances succumbs does not make us sympathetic to Hindley, although he appears much worthier of our sympathy than the "unreclaimed creature" that is Heathcliff. Emily Bronte makes us loathe Hindley, while we cannot loathe Heathcliff. In the movie version of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff exudes sensuality. But the Heathcliff of the novel seems completely asexual, his love more an obsession than a physical promise. Thus, when he presses Catherine to himself when he discovers her dying, his reaction has nothing to do with sensual longing and everything to do with a violent obsession. Catherine even tells Nelly that her love for Heathcliff contains "little visible delight" (82). All the sexual attractions belong to Edgar Linton, and they mean next to nothing to Catherine. Obviously, there is no inherent contradiction between passionate souls and their sexuality. The two have often been combined; the crucial thing is that **passion submerges sexuality**. It should not be confused with that sexuality.

*Wuthering Heights* contains a fascinating discussion of love between Nelly and Catherine. Nelly is the narrator and she condemns Catherine's view of love as primitive soul connection as complete "folly". Her view is not authoritative and we know that Nelly has an axe to grind in making effective relations fit the social norms that she interprets as 'common sense'. Nelly interrogates Catherine and forces her to articulate what love is when Catherine suggests that she is considering marrying Edgar Linton. She asks why Catherine might marry him, discounting her superficial rationales that he is "handsome" and "pleasant to be with" (78). She also makes short work of Catherine's claims that Edgar loves her and will someday be rich, making her "the greatest woman in the neighbourhood". Catherine is pushed into admitting that she is infatuated with Edgar's looks and invokes her right, like everyone else, to seek out "pleasure in the present". Only now will Nelly give partial approval, and her moral justification is the ethic of utility. Catherine will be making a good match that will clearly bring her the maximum amount of pleasure that she can calculate in the present.

Catherine now changes tack in order to discuss her own misgivings about the relationship, She prefaces her comments with an account of a dream that had a profound impact on her. She went to heaven but "heaven did not seem to be my home" (81). In her mind and her heart, she saw her emotional home as *Wuthering Heights* with Heathcliff. Marriage to Linton might appear to be a heaven on earth, but Catherine does not feel the soul connection to Linton. She does feel it to Heathcliff. Marriage to Heathcliff was not socially acceptable. Hindley had brought him "so low" that he was no longer marriage material if he had ever been. By marrying Edgar Linton, Catherine rationalizes that she can



help "Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power"(82). Leaving aside the issue of status and class, which might falsely reduce the romantic problem to one of economic inequality, what is particularly striking about Catherine's discussion is a completely new language of emotional connection and what sociologists of individuality call "interpersonal interpenetration". Catherine says "Heathcliff is more myself than I am" and goes so far as to say "I am Heathcliff" (82). This fact has nothing to do with power or pleasure. It is "necessary" and "eternal". Needless to say, this is strange language to describe a human relationship. It completely denies temporality. It obliterates sensual pleasure as the axis of what is now a hugely significant relationship. It completely flies in the face of Nelly's common sense. But what strikes Nelly, who is anything but a stupid person as her many manipulations evidence, this kind of talk strikes her as being "wicked" and "unprincipled".

Before exploring wickedness or the demonic in romantic love, a thematic that Emily Bronte certainly contributed to, I want to discuss the meaning of the soul to soul connection that Catherine invokes when you says "I am Heathcliff". On the one hand, Catherine obviously isn't Heathcliff. It is significant that she is much more comfortable with and adept in meeting social expectations than is Heathcliff. She's also much more in tune with words and books, the high end devices that society uses to civilize elites. Even before we meet Catherine, we meet her books and see, of course, that she is a very independent and aware 'miss'. Her writing shows that she's a mentor to Heathcliff and he takes his cues from this rather domineering little 'mistress'. Does that seem like an egalitarian soul-to-soul relationship to you? If we are going to make sense of statements like "Heathcliff is more myself than I am", we are going to need to interpret the soul connection at a deeper level. Heathcliff must represent something that is *essential* in Catherine's identity rather than all the qualities she possesses or could come to possess, something that she will go nuts before she gives up. It's also obviously something that Edgar doesn't possess and that Nelly Dean distrusts. Here is what Nelly has to say about the *difference* between her Master and Mistress (107):

My heart invariably cleaved to the master's, in preference to Catherine's side; with reason, I imagined, for he was kind and trustful, and honourable: and she – she could not be called the *opposite*, yet, she seemed to allow herself such wide latitude, that I had little faith in her principles, and still less sympathy for her feelings. I wanted something to happen which might have the effect of freeing both Wuthering Heights and the Grange of Mr Heathcliff, quietly leaving us as we had been prior to his advent.

Nelly desperately wants Catherine to be a responsible adult and a dutiful wife. But Catherine is loyal to her childhood and unwilling to give up either it or Heathcliff.

What is it specifically about her childhood and her childhood friend that is so essential to Catherine's identity? That's a very difficult question to answer absolutely, but it must have something to do with *play* and *playfulness*. Cathy and Heathcliff are in their own paradise when they play together. Playing and playfulness imply *creating* your own universe to suit *yourself*. The only rules are the ones that you create for yourself. In the world of play, you don't have to concern yourself with external rules. What is more, you love and enjoy yourself. Heathcliff is the perfect 'other' for Catherine because he worships her and goes along with her domineering games. Now, when the child enters adult society, he or she

may put away the games of childhood. But they don't necessarily have to surrender all of the joy, creativity, exuberance and confidence that they gain from play. Catherine brings the optimism, and some of the wildness of childhood, into her adult behavior. It makes her who she is. She is not completely socialized. She loves herself for herself and she assumes that everyone else does or should love her. When she discovers that Nelly Dean does not 'love' her and that her otherwise doting and indulgent husband wants Heathcliff out of the way, her situation is unbearable. Heathcliff knows intuitively that life at the Grange has become a living "hell".

### **Love and the Demonic**

Victorian contemporaries found *Wuthering Heights* hard to take because its central message is that loving ourselves and others is always going to involve the demonic. On the one side, you've got Nelly the self-confessed "agent of patriarchal law" (81). On the other side, you've got the Catherine-Heathcliff connection. Some critics see Nelly as a villain. Charlotte Brontë tried to represent her as the paragon of "true benevolence and homely fidelity". She is neither saint nor sinner, just as Catherine is neither completely vicious nor innocent. Both Nelly and Catherine have the power to heal and to hurt. Nelly leans towards adaptability and balance while Catherine is perched more precariously on the edge of childhood anarchy – a captivating but dangerous woman-child. There is no doubt that Victorian readers would lean towards Nelly's perspective, just as Catherine's spunky rejection of straight-laced rationality tends to appeal to today's reader. But Catherine is hardly an ideal heroine because, in her dementia, she slips back into childhood rather than being able to integrate the child with the adult.

Although we may admire her, Catherine is not the heroine. She lacks the psychic integration that would make her such. For many modern readers, the Catherine-Heathcliff union has become something of a romantic idealization. But that ideal type is only feasible if one partially identifies with Heathcliff, something that Emily Brontë makes it difficult for her attentive readers to do. Even Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* has more redeeming qualities than Heathcliff. We are not even allowed to sympathize with him in his death, where the joy on his face freezes into a demonic stare. Heathcliff is described by everyone, including Catherine in her conversations with Isabella, as a nasty guy. And to many order loving Victorians, he must have appeared as Satan in their tidy Garden of Eden. We can't identify with Heathcliff because he has none of the weaknesses of a real person. He's largely a metaphor for "anarchic and libidinal power" He's the kind of male demon that young Victorian girls like Isabella were rightly warned against.

*Wuthering Heights* holds two realities in suspension – the wild and uncontrollable world of the Heights that borders on the demonic and the straight-laced and honourable world of the Grange that lacks vitality. As much as we might admire Edgar Linton, he seems bloodless in comparison to Heathcliff, and Heathcliff, remember, is largely a symbol or a metaphor. What results from Emily Brontë's ambiguous suspension of these two realities, however, is a rather stark realization. Without the psychic integration of demonic elements in our lives, our life itself will be less meaningful and our love will lack passion. Another way of putting this is that love is not rational. The passionate imagination combines tenderness and cruelty, life and death, anarchy and order in ways that have nothing to do with conventional social

rules and responsibilities. We are simultaneously fascinated by what repulses us. That is precisely the attraction of Heathcliff.

It is interesting that Isabella, and many other lovers of 'bad boys' ever since, generates an imaginary image of Heathcliff that she loves and that will love her back in equal measure. Catherine bluntly informs Isabella that Heathcliff is "not a rough diamond" but a "fierce, pitiless, wolfish man"(103). Nelly echoes this judgment, adding details about Heathcliff's *knavish* behavior at Wuthering Heights. Isabella not only refuses to listen to counsel, but becomes a vicious "tigress" towards a well-meaning Catherine in defense of her love. Even your average Victorian reader could hardly find this whirlwind love affair with a brutish and unresponsive Heathcliff compelling, were it not for the fact that the dangerous and demonic is always captivating. And it is doubly captivating and entirely exotic for those who have led protected and comfortable lives.

Erotic passion, which I remind you need not focus on sex, is a potent drug. A considerable component of love's charm, like that of all drugs, lies in breaking many of the injunctions and taboos that surround it. Throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth-century (and in some circles ever since), writers were optimistic that love, happiness, character, duty and goodness could all be balanced together in one wonderful life affirming equation. Schlegel's *Lucinda* represents the literary pinnacle of this enthusiasm – the religion or utopia of love. The later romantics, however, tended to view love and ethics as completely different and even opposed dimensions. Catherine's love for Heathcliff has a lot to do with making her life worth living but nothing whatsoever to do with social ethics. Heathcliff makes the issue very clear when describing the living hell that Edgar and Nelly are putting Catherine through by making her choose between love and wifely duty:

You say she is often restless and anxious looking – is that a proof of tranquility? You talk of her mind being unsettled – How the devil could it be otherwise, in her frightful isolation. And that insipid, paltry creature attending her from *duty* and *humanity*! From *pity* and *charity*! He might as well plant an oak in a flower-pot, and expect it to thrive, as imagine he can restore her to vigour in the soul of his shallow cares!

Love may not be the exact opposite of ethics, but it often finds itself opposed to social norms.

The acceptance of the demonic element transposes the emphasis in love in a direction that, while not exactly new, tends to be stifled by social ethics – the happiness of the individual. "Happiness" may not be the very best word to use here because it implies a variety of social considerations such as comfort, security and belonging. In Catherine's case, a better term might be living a life that is "personally meaningful". By the mid-nineteenth century, individualism had developed to the degree that social acceptance and personal freedom were on a collision course. Love was looking for freedom from social considerations, as much to avoid personal unhappiness as to find happiness. Life and love now needed to be meaningful *on personal terms*. And that meant embracing the demonic.

*Wuthering Heights* is one of the first works of literature to explore the demonic as something more meaningful than forcing the reader to *feel*. Hereafter, the relation of the demonic to the passionate life, and especially to love, would be explored more fully. The alternative vision of patriarchal authority and

domestic fidelity, represented by Nelly Dean, would retreat into the cultural background. Society and culture would bifurcate. Ideas of love, at least the more interesting ideas of love, would take on a distinctly personal and anti-social hue.

### **The Feminism of *Wuthering Heights***

*Wuthering Heights* is above all else a love story. Actually, as you will see, it is two parallel and interweaving love tales – that of Catherine Linton and Heathcliff and that of Catherine's daughter with Hareton Earnshaw – that offer two possible models of love. It should be obvious that the relationship between Edgar Linton and Catherine does not qualify as a *modern* love story precisely because it lacks the piquancy of a soul-to-soul relationship that admits the possibility of danger and the demonic. Emily Bronte is defining the love bond on entirely new terms that all of you will be familiar with. Edgar is disqualified, not because he's a bad guy, but because he's Catherine's soul mate. You can only have one soul mate!

These days a novel about finding your soul mate would hardly count as feminist literature and the mantle for feminism among the Bronte sisters typically goes to Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. However, there are good reasons to consider *Wuthering Heights* as a feminist novel, and even to give preference in some respects to Emily over Charlotte. One of the most striking elements in the novel is the attention given to the character of Catherine. Whether you approve or disapprove of her, she is an interesting and fully developed character. She is vivacious, willful, charming and stubborn, not necessarily in that order. She alone (at least in Volume I) has the ability to straddle the worlds of the Grange and the Heights and, until she's blocked by Edgar and Nelly, she thrives in both worlds. She stands up to patriarchal authority in the form of her father and Joseph, defying the former and caricaturing the latter. In a world that typically socialized women into dutiful or hysterical wives, she has a sense of her own independence. Moreover, she manages to like herself in the face of people like Nelly who won't give her approval. This remarkable ability to 'love' herself may make her selfish in some ways, but it also makes her very forgiving. In a world where women were meant to be meek and servile, Catherine is a fascinating creation.

There was probably more Nelly in Emily Bronte than Catherine which makes this literary character all the more surprising. Perhaps Emily drew upon her own strong will and independence as a writer to create a strong woman in a highly circumscribed and provincial environment. What is important here is Catherine's individualism. Warts and all, she is definitely her own person. Even when she goes mad, she's not the hysterical Victorian lady of leisure. Her madness, like Heathcliff's self-starvation is a conscious choice and she's quite articulate about what is going on in her mind. She simply will not accept a world that will not accept her soul-mate. While all of this provides an argument for a certain kind of feminism – one that affirms individual rather than social power – it does not exhaust the novel's feminism. The most amazing feature of the novel is its exploration of androgyny. Prior to getting caught out at the Grange, there is not much to distinguish Catherine from Heathcliff. They even dress the same and use their pinafores to create a fortress from Joseph. They ramble on the moors; Catherine gets just as filthy as Heathcliff; and, most telling, there is nothing the least bit feminine about Catherine.

Catherine is soon fashioned into a beauty, which she embraces for the comfort and power that this brings. She does not, however, lose the distinctly male toughness that she developed playing on the moors. While she appreciates her handsome husband's virtuous qualities, she has nothing but scorn for his and Isabella's softness. It should be noted that this is anything but a condemnation based on gender roles – where men are meant to be strong and women weak – it comes directly out of her own rough and tumble experience. Catherine is as critical of Isabella on this score as she is of Edgar. Just because Catherine chooses a certain lifestyle does not mean that she identifies completely with role. Her candid conversation with Isabella contains none of those features that we might call feminine – she cuts to the chase, tells it like it is, without any sentiment, in fact without any sensitivity whatsoever.

Catherine's relationship with Heathcliff is particularly fascinating. While I would not completely deny a male-female dynamic, there is a lack of sexual tension here that is very telling. Heathcliff begins to feel betrayed by Catherine from the moment she adopts feminine fashion and manners. He feels totally forsaken when he mistakenly thinks that Catherine has chosen Edgar over him. For her part, Catherine clearly distinguishes her feminine feelings for Edgar – who she clearly adores *as a woman* – from her soul connection to Heathcliff. If we are going to seriously consider the gender aspect of the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, we should not interpret it as the kind of romantic love espoused by someone like Schlegel in *Lucinde*. The type of bond is much closer to that of a particularly intimate brother and sister prior to the bifurcation of roles and responsibilities. Certainly, Heathcliff and Catherine saw themselves as brothers and sisters in their youthful rambles on the moors. The difference that makes a difference here is that few brothers and sisters would ever have the connection that these two people did.

## Conclusion

These considerations lead us back to where we started – the autobiographical context for *Wuthering Heights*. Where did Emily Brontë draw her inspiration for this soul-to-soul connection with its deliberate blurring of the lines between male and female? Emily Brontë bonded with her brother Branwell who was dying of tuberculosis at the time she conceived *Wuthering Heights*. While the declining Branwell had nothing in common with Catherine or Heathcliff as characters – they embodied the fierce will that he lacked – the tragedy of the Catherine-Heathcliff separation of intimately connected selves does mirror Branwell's inability to transfer his childhood promise into adult roles and relationships. Emily Brontë most certainly did have a death wish after Branwell's passing. Both Branwell and Emily equated desire with the imaginings of childhood rather than the experience of adulthood. *Wuthering Heights* is the literary testament to the promise of childhood and to the special friendship between a brother and a sister who dreamed together.

Whoever would have guessed that this literary homage to childhood dreaming would become one of the most important novels of the modern age? Certainly not Emily Brontë who willed her death soon after her brother's. Certainly not the author of *Jane Eyre*, who was closest to Branwell before he gave up on life but who didn't so much as give him an honourable mention in her introduction to the collected novels of her sisters. What makes *Wuthering Heights* an enduring and romantic classic, even more relevant today than when it was written, is the transposition of a very real and painful brother

sister parting into an ideal type of soul-to-soul connection that has become the very archetype of love. It is largely irrelevant now that this kind of relationship had its basis in a real brother and sister relationship and more important that this special kind of friendship is what many of us now look for in a mate. It does not seem to deter us that Catherine was petulant and Heathcliff a veritable villain. What counts overwhelmingly for is that they had this relationship – this intense connection, this sense of complete unity. It doesn't matter either that this relationship couldn't withstand social pressures; what matters more to many of us is that Heathcliff and Catherine finally get together again, even if it is as disembodied ghosts. Some of us are more than willing to *chill out the semantics* and ignore the social realities in our search for unity with our other halves.

The soul to soul connection of Heathcliff and Catherine haunts *Wuthering Heights*, although their earthly relationship pretty much ends in Volume I. As we move through Volume II, another love story emerges – that between Catherine's daughter (that we'll be calling *Cathy* to distinguish her from her mother) and Hereton Earnshaw. This is a love story with a happier ending. Since Cathy is in some ways very much like her mother and Hereton has been coached into sullenness by Heathcliff and his name also begins with H, we have to ask exactly what is going on? Is this a parallel version with a different ending, something we are very familiar with? What might have been? Or is this the culmination of a family saga that returns to something approaching normalcy and patriarchal authority, as Nelly appears to suggest? Is something like brother and sisterly love possible in this world, and on what terms? Does the second love story complete the first or trump it? Why is it that we still think of Heathcliff and Catherine when we think about *Wuthering Heights* but so seldom Cathy and Hereton? And what about the weird ending, with unquiet ghosts strutting around? Your answer to most of these questions is probably as good as mine.

But even if you like the way the second love story turns out, my guess is that you'll find something unsatisfying about it. The biggest single problem with Volume II I'll tell you in advance. It's the happy ending. Happy endings are obviously boring because...what can you say? They planted flowers outside of the Heights. So what? It's not only the lack of dramatic tension that disturbs so many of us, however. It's something more significant. One of the most profound new ideas of love is that it is not necessarily related to our happiness. Indeed, any definition of happiness seems insipid in comparison to our modern idea of love. It is not just the traditional idea love involves 'suffering', or is measured by suffering; it is that love transcends either happiness or suffering. Late romantic love is an idea and an ideal that relates primarily to itself rather than anything outside itself. Love finally became culturally autonomous.

## Wuthering Heights (2)

### **Divided Selves**

Last week I suggested that one of the most important ways to read *Wuthering Heights* is in terms of our search, not simply for love, but for a soul mate. A soul mate is another person who connects with us at the most intimate level – another self. Unless we find that soul mate, we will stay forever divided from ourselves. If you think back to the beginning of the course, you will remember that this idea is not new in Western civilization. It is the definition of love that Aristophanes offered up in *Symposium*. The original human beings were joined at the hip, but to punish their hubris, the gods divided us into two. Now we spend our lives looking for that other half to complete us. You may also remember that Plato attacked the idea of finding love or unity with another person. At best, other people are stepping-stones to what we really lack – goodness or virtue. Christianity adapted Plato's discussion of love to the search for unity with god in heaven. Only very slowly did the love of two people, for their own sake, emerge as an ideal and, even then, it competed with other ideals.

Ever since Plato, the love of two individuals for each other was submerged within a web of social ideals and relationships. What was new in works like *Wuthering Heights* was the possibility that love was its own justification and that the love connection could trump social ideals and relationships. What particularly disturbed Victorian readers, including Emily Brontë's sister Charlotte, was the fascination of distinctly asocial kind of loving with distinctly demonic elements. The soul connection between Heathcliff and Catherine was established in childhood, a time when social norms and gender roles were not fixed in the individual, and when play allows individuals to imaginatively enjoy themselves and their partners. Heathcliff and Catherine were subjected to rules by a patriarchal father and a sermonizing servant, but the point is that they didn't allow themselves to be defined by those rules. By social norms, these children were *wild*. In terms of their psyche, Heathcliff and Catherine were *free* to be themselves.

The romantic writers put considerable emphasis on childhood freedom and childish play because they firmly believed that modernity fragmented consciousness into rigid and rational rules and roles that deprived culture of *spirit*. Against an abstract rationalistic *society*, they appealed to the imagination of the individual, and especially the individual's capacity for "intense attachments" during childhood (189). With modern adulthood, with the one big exception of the time one falls in love, relationships with other people tend to be cool and calculating. The warm feelings of childhood are either forgotten or so diluted that they become nostalgic emotional relics rather than active principles.

The early romantics were anti-social in principle rather than practice because they wanted to change modern society by releasing creative imagination. But there was a distinct tendency in romanticism to indulge in emotionalism for its own sake and to make strong feeling its own justification in a world they regarded as unfeeling. As romantic writers became more pessimistic about changing the world, they tended to beat a retreat from

bureaucratic reason towards an irrationality with demonic properties. One distinct advantage of the uncanny realm of ghosts and hauntings, for example, is that it invokes primitive and childhood terror and effectively dissolves the power of the everyday. The unquiet ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff serve precisely this purpose.

### **‘Unquiet Ghosts’ versus ‘Ancient Associations’**

The ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff haunt Volume II of *Wuthering Heights*. The otherworldly power of their soul connection puts Emily Brontë's novel firmly within the genre of romantic pessimism. That connection eclipses, and to some extent, explodes conventional social norms. Catherine and Heathcliff's bond has nothing to do with goodness or religion. Their love is much closer to hate than to kindness. It operates completely outside the spheres of family and kinship, so much so that Heathcliff actually says that he “*detests*” (and he means it!) Catherine's daughter. He makes a point of ruining the lives of those who were closest to his soul mate. His love is possessive and aggressive. Heathcliff's aggression cuts completely through the veneer of civilization, simultaneously shocking us and at the same time exposing the violence just bubbling beneath the surface in all of us.

The emotive power of this late romantic critique of modern culture and civilization is so potent that the alternate reality represented especially by Nelly Dean rarely gets its due. What makes *Wuthering Heights* much more complex than a typical romantic novel is that the *ancient associations* cherished by Nelly and the kindness and affection that Edgar Linton bestows on his daughter Cathy are given considerable scope, especially in Volume II. Emily Brontë also dwells much more in that Volume on the dangers, indeed the horrors, of indulging one's individual feeling. All of which begs the question -- why is this novel so overwhelmingly interpreted as the tragic love story of Catherine and Heathcliff and their ghosts. The main answer has to be the romantic emphasis on the individual. *Wuthering Heights* is not so much a love story that extends beyond the material world as it is an exploration and liberation of individual obsession. What attracts us to Heathcliff and Catherine is what repelled many contemporary readers. Not only are we more willing to embrace the irrationality of life than many Victorians, but also we tend to interpret our world more in terms of individual desire and will. The disregard social restraint and control is what appeals to us.

Volume II begins with the obsessive and violent embrace of Catherine and Heathcliff, followed shortly by Catherine's death. Heathcliff will not accept Catherine's death; he says “I ‘cannot’ live without my life! I ‘cannot’ live without my soul!” Like Catherine in Volume I, he spurns the consolations of religion and the norms of society because he desires Catherine. Catherine is his one single obsession. Nothing else is important to him unless it is his intense hatred of anything and anyone who has ever stood in the way of his desire. Heathcliff is a vicious, nasty, sordid person. Actually, he is not so much a person as the demonic personification of desire. What fascinates us about this “goblin”, this near sociopath, is that he accepts no other reality than his own. Even in his relations with Catherine, his attitude is one of all or nothing, and his obsession effectively destroys



her and the lives of several others in the process. One of the people he tries to destroy is Catherine's daughter Cathy.

Cathy is an interesting literary construction for a number of reasons. She's an amalgam of her mother and father and an ideal type merging spirit with kindness. But we are first introduced to her as an unwelcome child. We never even hear that her mother is pregnant until she gives birth to a premature baby. You would think that there would be some mention that Catherine is going to have a child, especially since this fact would obviously relate to her physical and mental health. The literary reason why the pregnancy isn't worked into the story may be because Catherine's death, like Heathcliff's obsession, is an act of will. If she can't get what she wants, she's going to make everyone suffer, including herself. Another reason why the pregnancy goes unmentioned is that expectation of a child would detract the reader's attention from the only relationship that really counts for Catherine and Heathcliff – the one between themselves. The extreme soul connection that Emily Bronte describes cannot extend outwards, only inwards.

Catherine is better socialized than Heathcliff, and she's a much more interesting and dynamic character as I described in my first lecture. But the bottom line is that she is still a spoiled child who wants what she wants, and she wants everything her own way. She is willing to tolerate others like Isabella, and even to show kindness on her husband Edgar, but only as long as she gets what she wants. She has a child's sense of entitlement. She thinks that the universe revolves around her. What attracts us to Cathy is her childlike enthusiasms and embrace of life. But when this abruptly turns into an embrace of death, why is it that the reader finds her so enchanting? It can't be simply that we 'buy into' the soul-mate connection she has with Heathcliff, since this connection is so blatantly a function of desire and will. Can we really, for example, imagine Heathcliff and Catherine getting married and settling down? If so, what exactly is it that we are imagining, since Heathcliff is not a nice person and Catherine is something of a princess? Do we really buy Catherine's justification that she can be married to Edgar and help out Heathcliff with Hindley? Is she really that selfless a person?

Nelly certainly doesn't buy into Heathcliff and Catherine's reality, although she is sympathetic to the fact that they were once playmates and that the *separation of friends* was hard on both of them. Do we buy into it? Perhaps we do subscribe to the soul-mate connection to some extent, but my guess is that what we modern readers really identify with, besides Cathy's strong attachments to a place and a person, is her sense of freedom and her unwillingness to compromise. It is Catherine's individuality rather than her love for him, that attracts Heathcliff and us to her. All of us desire to return to that relatively liberated state of childhood. It is the little *waif* in Catherine that we relate to. Ever since the romantics, childhood attracts us all.

Of course, for the romantics childhood represented much more than unlimited desire and relative freedom. A child is imaginative and uninhibited. A child is capable of "intense attachments". Even the selfish and willful aspects of childhood, when connected to strong attachments, make the child a powerful force. What distinguishes Catherine and Heathcliff from some of the more socialized characters in the novel is their sense of

personal power that implodes into a death wish when it is thwarted. That sense of power is lacking absolutely in Heathcliff's son Linton and relatively in Edgar and Isabella (the products of the Grange). One of the tactics of late romantic writers is to present individuals like Edgar, Isabella, and Linton as bloodless and insipid characters in comparison to romantic figures like Heathcliff and Catherine. Thus, Catherine dismisses her husband as a posturing weakling in comparison with the ferocious Heathcliff. Isabella is a dupe; her son Linton is feminized in the worst possible way; and Lockwood is a perpetual adolescent, who desperately wants romance but is totally incapable of acting on his desires.

Romantic writers typically enlisted readers' sympathies with the strong feelings of their protagonists by presenting their more restrained and controlled counterparts as emotional weaklings. Emily Brontë is no exception although she is unique in providing us with other points of view. She also deploys a common romantic descriptive technique to partly excuse the extreme polarities of emotion of heroes and heroines. Heathcliff is a hater, a *detester*, even of his own child. But he is not a hypocrite. Similarly, Catherine is quite up front about her belief that everyone *loves* her or, at least, *ought to love her*. The more civilized characters in the novel, tend to hide their savagery from others and from themselves. Lockwood's rubbing of the child ghost's hand against the glass and Edgar's sucker punch and hasty retreat from Heathcliff evidence cowardice. Linton is a colossal sissy, a whiner, and a self-confessed coward. But, when given a chance, he is just as cruel as his father and with far less reason, because his bad behaviour is towards Cathy who has shown him nothing but kindness. Cathy herself tends to be cruel towards social inferiors and her victim, Hareton Earnshaw was seen by Isabella "hanging a litter of puppies from a chair back in the doorway" (183). Even that stout defender of common sense and "ancient associations", Nelly Dean, could be viewed as a meddler and a megalomaniac in her attempts to assert patriarchal authority.

From the romantic point of view, therefore, the Catherine-Heathcliff axis is the legitimate center of the novel. Heathcliff may be more of a symbol and a metaphor than a real character, but he is dynamic in ways that other male representatives are not. The reader identifies, not so much perhaps with their soul to soul connection, as with Catherine and Heathcliff's willed childhood reality. And many of us desire that soul partner even if it is really our own freedom and identity that is at stake. We can, if we wish, view all the other characters in the novel as phoney, hypocritical, insipid, boring or some combination of those traits. Only Emily Brontë is not a typical romantic writer, and she is not going to make it that easy for us.

### **From the Heights to the Grange and Back Again**

One of the strokes of genius of *Wuthering Heights* is that the action all takes place in the space between two houses. The Grange represents gentrified civilization and socialization whereas the Heights represents natural wildness and childhood exuberance. In terms of literary emphasis, the Heights might seem to be the winner, but the tale constantly moves between the two *houses*. If the Heights is in the title and the romantic consciousness, a great deal of the narrative takes place in the Grange, including the

highly emotional embracing and kissing between Catherine and Heathcliff. Catherine may wish to return from heaven to the Heights, but she dies in the Grange and is buried in the local churchyard. At the end of the novel, the Heights is boarded up and left to the Joseph and the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff. Hareton and Cathy are moving back to the Grange. So, if there is a winner, you might say that it is the Grange.

It makes little sense to talk about winners and losers in a novel that is so very ambiguous. Nelly may think she's won the day when her erstwhile "children" Cathy and Hareton decide to get married and inhabit the Grange. But the ghosts are still hanging around, and even Nelly is scared of them. The only people who aren't scared of ghosts is Cathy and Hareton because they are making a new life in love together. But Hareton is Heathcliff's pseudo child and Cathy is Catherine's real one. They must be in some sense reflections or resemblances of each other. The question is how to make sense of this. It's crucial, I think to take the story of Cathy and Hareton as seriously as that of Heathcliff and Cathy despite all the romantic attention to the latter. And it's important to take the Grange and seriously as the Heights.

Since the female characters of Emily Bronte are always the most interesting, let's begin with Cathy. She clearly is a version of her mother in her "sauciness" and her "capacity for strong attachments"; she's just as strong willed and rebellious as her mother (189). The telling question is how she is different from the elder Catherine. Emily Bronte wants us to know she is different because, unlike some of the other characters who bear a strong physical resemblance to Catherine that terrorizes Heathcliff, Cathy doesn't resemble her mother. Most important, Nelly tells us that she's softer and milder and more thoughtful than her mother. She doesn't get as angry as her mother did whenever her will was thwarted. And the big issue, she loves differently than her mother. While her mother's love was "fierce", her's was deep and tender.

A key relationship that operates differently for Cathy than for Catherine is the relationship with the father. Catherine's father represented patriarchal authority, while Edgar Linton combined duty and kindness in relatively equal measure, but with a tendency always towards the tender end of parenting. As a result, Cathy is a much more complex and adaptable person than her mother was. Catherine must think everyone loves her, and if they don't they must be mistaken. When people don't give her what she wants, Catherine wills her own death. Cathy weathers the calculated abuse of Heathcliff and refuses to return hate for hate. She's clearly not perfect in the way she handles her initial exchanges with Hareton, but she learns from her mistakes. An interesting example of her ability to deal with people is her heated exchange with Heathcliff once she knows that she has the affection of Hareton. She initially *assumes* that Hareton will take her side against Heathcliff, but she seriously underestimates Hareton's affection for his stepfather. Once she realizes that Hareton is pained by attacks on Heathcliff and by Cathy undermining what he considers a positive relationship, she avoids giving offence and tacitly accepts that her and Hareton's impression of Heathcliff will always be different. One cannot imagine her mother adopting a similar stance with a lover – for Catherine, Heathcliff and she are one person – one soul -- against the world.

Cathy is the product of Edgar's duty with kindness and Catherine's 'warm attachments'. Another way of putting this is that she is a combination of civilized Grange and the natural Heights. The Grange and the Heights are often 'off limits' to the inhabitants of each, and sometimes for good reason. Evil, in the form of Heathcliff, resides at the Heights. The hatred between Edgar and Heathcliff means that the former is right to be vigilant about his daughter. But if there is a lesson in the novel, it is that the Grange and the Heights need each other.

What does it mean to say that the Grange and the Heights need each other? Why does a romantic novelist spend so much attention on the Grange? Why did Catherine need to go and live there with Edgar, if it didn't end up doing her any good? From an individual viewpoint, the Grange could only be a foil to Catherine's wild emotional attachment to the Heights. From another and longer term perspective, the mingling of Grange and Heights was an entirely positive development. The Hareton-Cathy connection is good for everyone, for them, for Nelly, for the tenants, for their future children and so on. The underlying meaning is that civilization without deep feeling is just as inadequate as strong attachments without civilization. For a romantic writer like Emily Brontë, strong attachments to place and person are important. The attachments of childhood are crucial. Throughout all the significant relationships in the novel, childhood or childlike behaviours dominate the character's consciousness. Heathcliff plays with Catherine, Cathy plays games like shuttlecock with the whiny Linton, and the ideal relationship between Cathy and Hareton Earnshaw is like that between two classmates, except that the educated girl is mentoring the rustic farmhand. However playful these friends may be, however, culture and civilization still loom large in the equation. The central symbol of culture – the book – must be present.

Emily Brontë, her sister Anne and her brother Branwell, all died young of tuberculosis. It is interesting therefore that this sickly romantic writer thought always in terms of health. The Grange represents civilization, but by the mid nineteenth-century, civilization seemed diseased. A feeble adult world, as represented by Edgar, and a decaying civilization, as represented by Linton, badly needed rejuvenating by the vitality union of childhood and romance. There is a particularly telling exchange about *heaven* between Cathy and Linton that I think sums up Emily Brontë's approach to modernity. Linton's heavenly ideal is that of a civilization in decline – he seeks to lay "in an ecstasy of peace". Cathy, on the other hand, wanted all to sparkle, and dance in a glorious jubilee" (248). The injection and survival of that vital spirit is best represented by an alliance with Hareton who thirsts for knowledge and connection.

The supine apathy of Linton is a defensive strategy at best. The overall structure of *Wuthering Heights* is a compelling argument that you can't hive off the Grange from the Heights. Civilization can't protect you from Heathcliffs. And you can't fight civilization by staying loyal to your childhood and the Heights. One day, the unsuspecting servants leave the doors to the Grange open, and Heathcliff comes in and destroys all their security. Characters in the novel keep closing doors and lattices and windows, but the outside comes in, even in the form of ghosts. Heathcliff shuts up Isabella and Cathy; it might work for a while; but eventually they find a way out. For a time, characters feel a

sense of security and normalcy in protected situations, but it's always a false promise. Heathcliff seems to be the most successful at *shutting doors* on others and getting in closed doors. But his flaunting of polite conventions ends up being a futile struggle. Towards the end, he confides to Nelly that he can no longer give his attention to controlling Hareton and Cathy and destroying their prospects. Hareton looks so much like the dead Catherine that his very presence mocks "my wild endeavours to hold my right, my degradation, my pride, my happiness, and my anguish":

But it is frenzy to repeat these thoughts to you; only it will let you know, why, with a reluctance to be always alone, his society is no benefit; rather an aggravation of the constant torment I suffer – and it partly contributes to render me regardless how he and his cousin go on together. I can give them no attention any more.

Even if you achieve what you think you want, you'll discover that it wasn't what you really wanted. The only place left for Heathcliff to go is death.

The symbol of the mingling of the Grange and the Heights, that could finally be completed once Heathcliff is dead, is the "importation of plants from the Grange" (317). By the time this happened, Heathcliff was totally disinterested in life and effectively starving himself to death. The cutting down of the traditional currant and gooseberry plants to house the roses marks the end of the reign not only of Heathcliff, whose already become a walking ghost, but also Joseph and Nelly. Joseph, a remnant of the old patriarchal authority, represented the world dominated by dogma and subordination, which Heathcliff and Catherine rebelled against. Joseph's power was always limited, even against children, as the spiritual world of the past was replaced with a more tolerant secular one. More interesting is the effective shift in power between Cathy and Nelly. On the surface, Nelly still asserts her claim to power. She says that both Cathy and Hareton are in a sense her children and her family and that she has achieved her purpose in seeing them come together and combine the properties of the Grange and the Heights. And Nelly has taken over the books for the tenancies because Cathy doesn't know how to do it. All this is very misleading, however, because Nelly's common sense authority and appeals to filial duty have been eclipsed.

### **The Narrators: Nelly Dean and Lockwood**

When discussing her sister's novel, Charlotte Bronte badly wanted to affirm Nelly Dean's sense of propriety as the authoritative 'voice' in the novel and to excuse the novel's rude and demonic elements. She reflected a very Victorian sense of fear of bewitchment by the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship. A close reading of the novel suggests that the real meaning of *Wuthering Heights* does not reside in that one relationship, although the appeal of the childlike soul to soul connection is real. The ultimate meaning of *Wuthering Heights* is that the child can and should be civilized but not at the expense of crushing the childlike spirit that an unhealthy modern society badly needs. That meaning is symbolized by the Cathy-Hareton pairing that improves significantly upon the Heathcliff-Catherine bond. Nelly Dean's interpretation of the

Cathy-Hareton pairing is limited by her overriding commitment to duty and old connections. She cannot see Cathy-Hareton as a new development.

It is not surprising that Charlotte Bronte would place so much emphasis on Nelly Dean because she represents the combination of a stable social order mitigated by common sense. But, as I remarked earlier, Miss Dean represents only one voice in the novel and not the one that attracts our heartfelt emotional sympathies, which tend, despite the demonic elements, towards the Heathcliff-Catherine axis that dominates the novel. Despite the fact that Nelly becomes the primary narrator, replacing Lockwood fairly early on, other viewpoints keep intruding. Not only the explicit voices of Heathcliff and Catherine who affirm a love that contradicts the Victorian social order and common sense, but also their adoption of a different conception of *time* that love is familiar with. To anyone who has been romantically in love, the interpretation of the relationship is that it is timeless even eternal. Nelly can't understand this conception of love and so she does what many contemporaries did when confronted with a romantic vision – she either attempts to make it fit her own paradigm as in the discussion of love with Catherine – or when pushed she regards such notions either as 'silly' or diabolical. And, although Heathcliff may really be diabolical, a reader with any sensitivity understands that love of this kind may be impractical but it is anything but silly.

Emily Bronte structures and intervenes in Nelly's narration in ways that force us to deal with the fact that neither viewpoint is conclusive; both are valid. Nobody in the novel represents an undisputed right way of looking at life and love. As if to emphasize that point, when confronted by Nelly with his deceitful dealings with young Cathy (she labels him a "despicable liar", Heathcliff rightly tells Nelly that she is also a very deceitful 'double dealer' who manipulates situations and emotions according to her own definition of rectitude. Heathcliff's truth is his timeless, but thwarted by historical considerations, connection to Catherine. He is not at all disturbed by Nelly or Joseph or Cathy's negative judgments, because they don't fit his deepest reality. Ironically, and demonstrating Emily Bronte's brilliance in exploring dueling realms of consciousness, the 'words' that disturb Heathcliff the most, are not Nelly's but Isabella's. She explodes by trivializing Heathcliff's sense of a timeless connection with Catherine:

“...if poor Catherine had trusted you, and assumed the ridiculous, contemptible, degrading title of Mrs Heathcliff, she would soon have presented a similar picture. *She* wouldn't have borne your abominable behavior quietly; her detestation and disgust must have found voice.”

Isabella's comments infuriate Heathcliff, as they were meant to do, but they are hypocritical. She herself was looking for the kind of connection with Heathcliff that her sister-in-law had.

One of the few redeeming personal qualities possessed by Heathcliff is that he “likes” Nelly Dean, even though she never very much liked him. Why does he continue to like her when she more than anyone else represents the threatening reality? It is really not clear; perhaps he views her still with childhood eyes as his nurse in a serious illness. In

any case, a close reading shows that Nelly is not entirely guiltless in many of the personal tragedies that occur in the novel. What decisively undermines her status as an authoritative voice, however, is that her attempted manipulations do not succeed. The novel concludes with two unions, Cathy and Heron as an earthly, and Catherine and Heathcliff as a ghostly, couple. The second is completely beyond Nelly Dean's comprehension, and the first is wonderful surprise that Nelly Dean didn't anticipate. In fact, Nelly was actively lobbying for a more traditional and secure pairing between Lockwood and Cathy. Had she been successful, the ensuing relationship would, at best, have approximated that between Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton. I say *at best* because there are reasons to think that the Nelly *solution* would have been disastrous.

For the attentive and engaged reader, Nelly's is a viewpoint to be taken seriously but most definitely not unilaterally. Emily Brontë forces her readers to consider two different realities and to confront the painful irony and ambiguity of modern life, where readers have to navigate their own personal meanings in a world full of meanings. Meaningful relationships are not synonymous with stable and orderly relationships. The couple in the novel who have a chance at something approaching a meaningful and stable relationship in the real world, rather than the world hereafter, are Cathy and Heron. But that doesn't mean that it is going to be easy. What bodes well for Cathy and Heron are three things: 1) they are playful and childlike and imaginative towards each other, which implies that they will generate meaningful moments and memories as they go along; 2) unlike Catherine and Heathcliff, they are flexible about finding what works in their relationship, and 3) while they are not obsessive or exclusive about their relationship, they give it primacy over both the sermonizing of Joseph and the common sense interpretations of Nelly Dean. "*They are afraid of nothing*", Lockwood **grumbles** "Together they would brave Satan and all his legions" (337).

Lockwood, of course, was the original narrator, the naïve but searching individual who introduced all of us into the world of Wuthering Heights and the Grange. In typical romantic stories, like those of Walter Scott, the hero is on a quest for meaning and love. Lockwood fits this romantic model for the most part; he wants into the world of Wuthering Heights because he's looking for something different and better than social norms and conventions. He's initially attracted to and identifies with Heathcliff precisely because the man represents solitariness and independence. His interest and attention soon lights on Cathy's red lower lip, and increases dramatically when he hears her tragic tale from Nelly. If Emily Brontë was composing a typical romantic novel, we would expect Lockwood to go through a series of tests that hardened and matured him as a person and made him worthy of someone as precious as Cathy.

The novel starts out as a romantic template, and at first we accept Lockwood as the voice of the romantic author and prepare to see the world through his eyes. Emily Brontë quickly undercuts her readers' expectations, however, by allowing us to see through Lockwood. In a novel full of 'immature lovers', we rapidly discover that Lockwood is an "uneasy and comical" emotional adolescent who is incapable of becoming an interesting love interest for Cathy. (Knoepfelmacher, 16) He hovers constantly and is stuck into permanent immaturity, between his desire for personal authenticity and a deep connection

with a soul mate, on the one hand, and social artifice and politeness, on the other. Whenever push comes to shove, his habitual pattern is to try to *escape* from commitment and into social convention. While he intuits that he might learn something interesting about love and commitment from the characters at Wuthering Heights, he relies on superficial language and gestures to engage with Heathcliff, Hareton and Cathy. The enormous difference between his civilized veneer and the reality of the passions and desires of the inhabitants of the Heights makes him engage in a comic series of blunders that might conceivably make us sympathize with him, *except* that we know he is a shallow and foolish adolescent and that his romantic quest is nothing more than a “pose”.

He's incapable of real love for an adult, if potentially playful, woman like Cathy. In fact, he is more unnerved by Cathy's “cool, regardless manner” than Heathcliff's outright rudeness. Rather than being a romantic searcher, he's much more like an artificial ‘gallant’ or story-book ‘courtier’. He's an urban “flatterer” rather than someone who is prepared to communicate. He hides behind words rather than seeking the deeper meaning in communication. And who is the person who hides and evades. He's exactly the kind of person who considers himself superior because of phoney considerations of status and culture. He not only misreads everyone, but he misreads them as country *bumkins*, *clowns* and social inferiors, caricaturing them even in their redeeming qualities.

When Lockwood is tested, even on his own adolescent grounds, by the *waif* that is Cathy's ghost scratching at the window, he not only fails to see an essential affinity between himself and the young Catherine, but he demonstrates what a shallow person and pathetic coward he is. Lockwood is incapable and deeply fearful of real connection at any level, unless he is able to rely on conventional status and the attendant language of an elite and effete superior class. Thus, Lockwood avoids meaningful relationships not only by ‘flattering others’ but by **flattering himself that he is a genuine seeker with a “susceptible heart”**. Instead of putting himself of the line, he *expects* others to recognize that he is superior, especially to rustics like Hareton. In effect, he flirts with rather than engages other people. And, when he's not successful, he moves on, notably back to the superficial urban civilization that he came from.

It should not be surprising that Nelly Dean takes over as the principal narrator because Lockwood soon demonstrates his inability to penetrate past the doors, locks and hidden recesses of Wuthering Heights to discover emotional well-springs of the characters. Nelly Dean clearly has a lot more going for her than this superficial creature; she is far more substantial. But Nelly also lacks the kind of in-depth engagement and wrestling with ambiguity that Emily Bronte wants her readers to show. Although she has nursed and raised Cathy from a child, and recognizes many of her strengths and weaknesses, she regards Lockwood as a potential marriage partner for her. Lockwood is no one's potential soul mate. Like so many people, he is an emotional tourist in life and is unlikely to find a home for his heart.

## **The Author and the Reader**



So why bother introducing a character like Lockwood as our first interpreter of the dark, mysterious, tense and troubling emotional cauldron that is the Heights? When you analyze a great novel, it is crucial to assume that the author knows what he or she is doing. You can certainly take your own meanings from the novel and interpret it in a way that feels good to you. But you should still consider that the *author* makes decisions about the novel's structure, overall meaning and characters. This is especially true at the beginning of a great work, where the author deals with her readers' expectations and establishes the work's trajectory. Emily Brontë has Lockwood there for at least three reasons. First, he represents the naïve and superficial reader, who will never discover the deep meaning of *Wuthering Heights*. Second, by exposing the way that Lockwood misreads everything, to the extent of transforming dead rabbits into cuddly cats, Brontë alerts more intelligent readers to the fact that they will need to go deeper if they want to really engage the emotional tension in the novel. Third, the author suggests that the *wish* to engage and incorporate one's own, let alone others', emotions involves much more than a mere *add-on* to modern urban civilization.

To the extent that a superficial tourist and ultimately marginal figure like Lockwood acts as the "the contemporary reader's agent, he only shows how unwilling his creator is to accommodate the values of that reader's culture" (Knoepfelmacher, 27). In order to get to a relatively happy ending in the Cathy-Hareton axis, we are going to have to move through the heart of darkness. The synthesis of a polite civilization and meaningful personal emotion is an intense and intensely difficult one to achieve, which is why Heathcliff and Cathy reject civilised life in preference for an unheavenly life after death. The outcome is doubtful to say the least, and most of us will be like Lockwood and escape back into our superficial but civilized and orderly lives.

Emily Brontë is defiant in the face of the reader's desire for facile solutions. "Although she will eventually allow Cathy to transform Hareton into a civilized version of Heathcliff" (K, 27) the novel as a whole fails to make the reader confident about the possibility and benefits of this domestication of emotion. It somehow isn't compelling and "Heathcliff, after all, not Hareton, remains the most memorable figure in *Wuthering Heights*" (K, 28). And the novel doesn't end with Cathy and Hareton's hard earned happiness; it ends with those troubling "unquiet slumbers" underground. Emily Brontë takes us through hypnotic terror and brings us back to the *normal pulses of life*, but whatever modern civilization does it can't get rid of the ghosts. It can only suppress them. If we want to explore ourselves and have meaningful relations with others, we need to appreciate that there are troubling ghosts and demons within us. Lockwood shakes off those ghosts and demons – he cannot tolerate "unquiet sleepers" and so he reluctantly returns to his common and superficial understanding of the world, grumbling about what he has lost.

Lockwood is not only a tourist, but a trespasser into the world of deep individual emotion. To the extent that he represented the expectations of contemporary Victorian society, Emily Brontë wanted to make the imaginary world of the Heights 'off-limits' to those conventional readers. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the novel's greatness was not appreciated by contemporaries. And those who glimpsed its inner

meanings were put off by its demonic aspects. This is not to say that some readers grasped the novel's importance, especially its imaginative force. The intricate structure of the novel had to await the penetrating insights of later literary critics. While the novel was always read, it speaks to *us* more than it did to Victorian contemporaries. The reasons why this is the case are not far to seek. First, as readers we are far more comfortable with the irrational and demonic aspects of life – as witness the spread of supernatural and uncanny literature – and much more suspicious of order, rationality and what passes as *civilization*. Second, we are far more individualistic and freer to move away from social norms to discover our own personal meanings in the world. Third, in the absence of religion and shared values, many of us yearn for connection. And, increasingly, our ideal type of connectivity, as hard as it may be to discover, is with a *soul mate*. Ultimately, *Wuthering Heights* is about finding that soul mate. What makes the Cathy-Heathcliff connection a modern parable for us, certainly more than it did for the Victorians who were clearly fascinated but frightened by it, is first and foremost its affirmation of the soul mate.

In some respects, many modern readers are the inversion of Lockwood. They are equally naïve, but in a very different sense, because they privilege the search for a soul mate above anything else. Emily Brontë did not want her readers to dismiss culture and civilization; she did not dismiss order and stability; there was a lot of Edgar Linton and Nelly Dean in her. What she sought was an injection of individual meaning and romantic connection in that world. Whereas Lockwood was most comfortable in civilized trappings, many of us are very comfortable in pursuing our individual desires and our search for a soul-mate. The modern Lockwood is always looking for love and ignoring society. The Victorian Lockwood retreats into society and the Modern Lockwood retreats into herself. The brilliance and timelessness of *Wuthering Heights* is to keep both civilization and the individual in play, to describe the tension between them, and to push us to consider the claims of both. At the end of the day, civilization without romance is meaningless. Love that ignores civilization may not be as meaningless but, ultimately, the individual fulfillment and the dissolving of differences that it supposes lead to the grave. Catherine and Heathcliff are united only in childhood and in death. They may even be happy, but that's not the sort of happy ending Emily Brontë was advocating.

## *The Gay Science: The Challenge of Modernity*

### **The Title**

Titles of books are important. The title of this particular book is *The Gay Science*, but what does Nietzsche mean by science and what does he mean by gay? Gay is the more important word because science for Nietzsche was a rudimentary rudder or steering mechanism in a meaningless world. So let's start with gay. Clearly gay didn't mean for him what it means for us, but it was still a strange choice of words for someone who was at least ostensibly a philosopher. Gay was often used to describe behavior in a Parisian café, a combination of playfulness, intoxication and, most definitely, danger. The denizens of the urban café were typically solitary individuals who came to shake off the boredom and meaninglessness of their daily lives. Gay is a very different word from the positive word of choice used by most philosophers past and present, and by most human beings when they attempt to be philosophical. That word is *happiness*. Nietzsche was very suspicious about the word 'happiness' and by implication western philosophy in general and by imputation people like *you and I* when we presume to discuss what is meaningful about life. Happiness, either now or in the hereafter, made Nietzsche simply nauseous. That still doesn't get us to what 'gay' means and, to be honest, it's not always easy to know what Nietzsche was trying to convey because he was always searching for how to live positively in the modern age. Being gay is a work in progress because it involves creativity. It's an action rather than an essence. You don't *be* joyful; rather, you create your *bliss*.

Now, you might argue that you can be *happy*, but that's exactly why Nietzsche detested the word happiness. What you would likely mean is that you are accepting of what is, content with what life has to offer, and not willing to rock the boat. REMs *shiny happy people* basically operate within the parameters of what they are happy to call their *reality*. What we often like about these kind of people is that they *go with flow*, are easy to get along with, and rarely show ill-will towards others. You can call this happy, if you like, says Nietzsche, but the practitioners of this kind of happiness are insipid, stupid, herd like, and most of all totally **boring**. People like that have always existed but they hardly define what is *noble* or interesting or important or progressive in human life. Nietzsche was an ultra-elitist, and you and might have a more sympathetic view of ordinary sorts of *decent* people. But then you'd have to contend with several of the trenchant points that Nietzsche makes about what he calls *the herd* in *The Gay Science*. First, the members of the herd are rarely really happy or totally without malice. They are often petty, jealous and mean minded – they are just too scared to show it. Second, the herd lacks the kind of wonder, curiosity and engagement in life that separates of should separate humans from animals. Third, members of the herd can be easily exploited by unscrupulous leaders. Fourth, herd like behavior is much more inexcusable in the modern age because it flies in the face of what humanity professes to value, namely the freedom to become individuals.

Finally, the biggest problem with the herd – and you should know from the Gay science that this herd includes the rich, the famous, the celebrity – is that its most ardent wish and pressing need is that you conform to it. Discussions of *happiness* always contain an imperative to conformity – be like us and you will be happy!

Throughout *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche condemns the happiness principle, but nowhere so much as when he refers to market utilitarianism. Utilitarianism wants to make everybody happy by making them the same. The people who run the utilitarian system – businessmen and politicians who are really just bureaucrats facilitating the imperatives of businessmen – are people who have absolutely no idea what it means to be *gay*. The system and its operators seem to believe that money will bring you happiness, but the net result is that no one, including the rich, is happy. The “habit” of making money becomes the mechanism that dominates the system and people spend their entire lives thinking about nothing else. Now, here’s where Nietzsche is so very interesting. Being a businessman and making money need not necessarily destroy joy. Business could become ‘interesting’ in the future but only under one condition. If it was no longer a duty, a necessity or a habit; if it became an art or a hobby, being a businessman or a businesswoman conceivably could be joyful. But that possibility is way off in the future because the market is the antithesis of ‘gay’; like science it is invoked as ‘truth’

The ‘market’ is a modern ‘truth’ and a very destructive one of things human for Nietzsche. It’s not the only truth. Another modern ‘truth’, and the very paradigm of modern truth statements, is *science*. This brings us to the second part of phrase *gay science*. What is science for Nietzsche? He’s a trained philosopher and philologist, so his definition of science is anything but simplistic. Science for him is the culmination of a long western emphasis on *reason*. Reason for him means thinking abstractly, and the Greeks were very good at it. Now people who write about Nietzsche sometimes suggest that he was opposed to reason, even that he was an irrationalist or a nihilist towards knowledge. Like anything in Nietzsche, who wasn’t afraid of contradicting himself, you can find evidence to support that argument. For example, he said “reason is a whore”. But there are at least three reasons why one should not come to such a conclusion. First, Nietzsche consistently praised knowledge seeking and criticized the herd for avoiding it. Second, reason and by implication ‘science’ had a hugely important purpose for primitive people. *The Gay Science* begins and ends with the issue of self-preservation – scientific knowledge has allowed us to go beyond simply preserving ourselves or controlling our environment towards allowing us to be highly creative. Third, reason in scientific form is a remarkably effective way of navigating normal reality. Its ‘truths’ clearly work to explain natural phenomena. Nietzsche has no problem with reason or science as long as it sticks to its own territory.

The problem is that reason and scientific reason are just a slice of life. Their primary purpose is to preserve biological and social life. They are not the *meaning of life* and they certainly do not make life *meaningful*. They can even – as was increasingly the case as the nineteenth-century wore on – make life less meaningful. Modern science, as Dostoyevsky, who Nietzsche admired

by the way, told us, turned human beings into atoms. The reality that science pretended to discover was not a 'human' reality. Human realities are not measurable objects but subjective impressions. By wanting to replace subjective with objective meanings, the scientific approach seriously misunderstood and impoverished human life. Nineteenth-century writers, artists and thinkers who recognized the challenge of science adopted different approaches to deal with logical positivism. Some sought to find affinities between their traditional 'beliefs' and modern scientific findings; many more sought to attack scientific thinking as 'inhuman' and dangerous; overall those opposed to scientific materialism began to position the *artist* as providing both a critique and imaginative alternative to its nihilistic implications. Nietzsche shared some of this legacy but was much more revolutionary in his approach. For Nietzsche, there was no going backwards from the modern world that reason and science had helped to construct. What was needed was a *going beyond* that affirmed human life on completely new terms.

### **The Tyranny of Good and Evil**

Modern science was not the problem. It was only the latest symptom of a disease that afflicted western consciousness. The real problem was that western men and women took themselves far too seriously. Or, rather, we take ourselves seriously in altogether the wrong way. There's nothing wrong with being serious; nothing interesting is accomplished without being serious; but there is something terribly wrong with turning seriousness into an end in itself. That kind of lifestyle is bound to get in the way of your joy or bliss. The mistake that Greek thinkers and the Christian fathers who followed them, made was to seek ultimate truths, turning them into abstractions upon which they clung. Western thinkers might disagree about what was 'true', but they all believed that truth was out there external to consciousness. The tragedy of western civilization in the nineteenth-century was that, as these truths increasingly became 'exploded' or trumped by science, there was a complete crisis of belief.

Religious thinkers, ethicists, and even artists in the West had affirmed life by referring to eternal truths upon which were based values. A much bigger problem than the battle between scientific and other forms of belief was that there are no such thing as 'higher values'. Science is a set of rules and tools; it is not a value. Western civilization was conceited about scientific progress but it was losing its sense of purpose. Nietzsche was not overly concerned about the impact of this development on the so-called *herd* or *common type*, but he did consider it a highly negative development for those with *nobility of soul*. Forget about Nietzsche's irritating praise of nobility for a second and ask yourself this question. What happens when intellectual and creative and cultured people lose their engagement in life. Two things. First, life itself becomes impoverished, even for the common types who no longer have noble examples to look up to. Second, the lowest common denominator, unenlightened self-interest, becomes the ruling principle of life.

What makes it difficult to break out of this herd like utilitarian stranglehold are wrongheaded ideas of good and evil. If there are no eternal values, then notions of good and evil are inherently problematic. The dilemma is that, even when philosophical and religious ‘truths’ are obliterated, ethical habits persist. A fundamental Nietzschean insight is that creative people need to get beyond the historical conventions of good and evil in order to create human values on new grounds. Creative engagement in life has nothing to do with conventions of good and evil. In fact, creativity depends on qualities that it is the express function of ethics to stamp out: uniqueness, superiority, an appetite for destruction, a desire to control, an unwillingness to bend to conventions. Creative people like me are not nice. At best we pretend to be. But secretly we think we are better than you. And for Nietzsche, *that* is a good thing.

For Nietzsche, the function of ethics – the entire panoply of good and evil – is to preserve the species. To that end, it gets the individual to conform to universal values. Elites in societies only conform to those values to the extent that they serve their purposes of control and domination. In a brilliant analysis of psychological motivation, Nietzsche suggests that while elites may actually believe that they are acting in the interest of God, humanity or whatever, they are really following their own desires. They have false consciousness perhaps of their own selfish desires, but it is those same desires that stimulate them to act. Selfishness is a good thing; even if it gives rise to cruelty and disorder, its overall effect on human life is positive. Elites generate not only beauty and culture but also meaning. Meaning, not materialism, makes life worth living.

While Nietzsche was hyper-conscious about being misunderstood, there should be no doubt about his analysis of selfishness. The self-interest that became the byword of nineteenth-century market economics has nothing to do with what he meant by selfishness. The selfish nobility that he praises were not interested in accumulation for pedestrian purposes; they did not seek possessions and power for their own sake; they were interested in putting their creative stamp on the society in which they lived. In Nietzschean terms, they wanted to turn the world into them. They wanted more than anything to be and to be seen as unique, exceptional and personally powerful. But in order to do that they had to generate images that others could worship or to link themselves to ideals that could be worshipped. The old nobility were still around in the nineteenth-century, but Nietzsche thought that they were irrelevant. The new nobility – the new creator – was the artist. Much more on the role of the artist later on in this lecture.

Before you can move forward, however, you have to deal with the stranglehold that the past has on our consciousness. Nietzsche was aware that people, even pioneers, find it difficult to orient themselves to the future. We are always looking in the rear view mirror for ideas about how to live, how to feel and what to do. We have a tendency to cling to other people’s ideas, particularly the ethical ideals of western civilization that had begun with Socrates and been adapted by the Christian church fathers. How do you escape falling into the old dichotomies of good and evil? Nietzsche advocated an almost postmodern approach to history. You look to

history, not for truth or truisms, but for examples of societies that were creative. For example, the pre-Socratic Greek tragedians, with their blending of Apollo and Dionysus offered one example of a creative, ennobling and purposeful approach to living. What those Greeks taught us is that life is tragic, but you can still dance.

Ethics is heavy and serious. Socrates may be able to think but he cannot dance.

### **Re-envisioning Modern Life**

What makes a work like *The Gay Science* so thrilling and frustrating at the same time is that it breaks with philosophical and literary conventions. Instead of the logical development of points within an argument, Nietzsche's style is erratic. Is it poetry or is it philosophy? It thrills some, because they can pick out what they like, and it frustrates others because they can't find a consistent formula that will sum Nietzsche's thought. Just when you think you've got a handle on him, he jumps to something completely different. Sometimes he's profound. Sometimes he's outrageous. He's the most quotable thinker in the modern world: that which does not kill us makes us stronger; if you look at the abyss long enough it looks back at you; God is dead and we have killed him; "the most powerful effect of women...is action at a distance"; "there is no reality for us".

The style is purposeful on Nietzsche's part, because if you are going to get readers to re-envision their world, they absolutely *have to do it for themselves*. The whole point of the Nietzschean experience is that you shouldn't be able to pin him down or become his disciple. To be somebody's monkey is to assume that there is a truth outside of you for you to follow. While someone conceivably can inspire you, if you follow them, if you relinquish your autonomy, you are lost. Nietzsche preferred enemies to followers. He was disgusted by most modern people precisely because he thought that they were "unstoppable machines" rather than autonomous human beings.

Nietzsche obviously defies simple or simplistic characterizations. But the characteristic that makes Nietzsche a distinctly modern writer is his ultra-individualism. We create the modern world as individuals because we have the opportunity for freedom and because species life in the present offers so few creative resources. Creativity now comes from *inside* us rather than outside us. Nietzsche criticizes many so-called 'modern' writers because they lack "self-sufficiency"; they are so obsessed with outside influences that they fail to appreciate the internal possibilities. The contemporary destruction of eternal meanings has its own *meaning* – that we create our own world. Those are our *truths* if only we are brave enough to embrace them. The solution to the riddle of history for Nietzsche is that most people have always been machines. The difference between today and the traditional world is that our forefathers "stopped being machines once in a while in order to *pray*."

Instead of being trapped in the rationalizations of the past, Nietzsche wants to open us up to the fact that human behavior is not primarily rational. We don't even need to be limited to a stereotypical interpretation of humanity. Science opens us up to the fact that all living beings operate according to 'instinct' and that reason itself is no more than a kind of instinct that is valuable to the extent that it: 1) affirms life, and 2) provides opportunities for different kinds of expression in the future. The so-called scientific method becomes harmful when it seeks to constrict human possibilities to rationalist options. Nietzsche suggests that, in a positivistic scientific world, someone who is superstitious may actually be superior because they have alternate, more interesting, and life affirming ways of looking at the world. While Nietzsche is open to science, he has doubts as to whether science can provide the grounds for new kinds of creativity or genuine experimentation in life. Scientific experiments are limited to a mundane real world that has nothing to do with creative expressions of life, which may be fanciful in a laboratory but could transform the way that we live.

Nietzsche wants us to consider *thinking*. Thinking has much more in common, he says, with dreaming than with abstract logic or mechanical processes. In both of these, the creative dimension is lacking. The fact that European society is so proud of its scientific, rationalistic, industrial advantage, demonstrates not only its ethnocentricity but also a disturbing fact, i.e. that we are smugly "satisfied with so little". It also makes us dangerous. The human mind, he suggests, is either a "secret garden" that can be cultivated or "a volcano" that will erupt if it is not developed. Many of these ideas Nietzsche shared with the romantics who came before him. But Nietzsche's innovative approach to modern life is reflected in his belief that truly modern thinking requires an entirely new *tempo*. Creative writers must always be moving forwards rather than backwards, hence the *adante* style of writing that he pioneers. It goes without saying that science is neutral, possibly opposed, to this kind of thinking.

Western men and women are losing their capacity to 'dream think'. In other words, modern society lacks imagination. This imaginative re-envisioning of life – Nietzsche calls himself the "somnambulist of the day"—is more than a romantic antidote to a mechanical world. The point is to transcend the prefabricated world completely.

### **The Dream (Nightmare for Nietzsche) of Equality**

A lot of what Nietzsche says about modern thinking and writing is well ahead of its time. His approach is entirely modern without any respect for those unwilling to embrace change. One difficulty that otherwise fans of Nietzsche have with his approach is his elitism, and lack of compassion for the oppressed, including workers and women. Whenever you think you've got him pegged, Nietzsche says something that makes you qualify your conclusions. For example, he identifies with worker's lack of respect for their capitalist bosses and he prefers the emotional approach of women to the calculating ethic of men. His fascination the history of love and the influence of diet on behavior have universal and democratic application. At the end of the day,



however, Nietzsche is decidedly anti-egalitarian. A socialist or feminized world would be anathema to him, even though he was clever enough to suspect that the western world was moving in that direction.

Nietzsche's abhorrence of a democratized world, like so many aspects of his thought, cannot be attributed to conservatism. He was anything but a conventional chauvinist. His primary concern about equality was that it ran counter to the human instincts that generated creativity. The freedom of the masses would offer a very limited kind of freedom to Nietzsche because it would inevitably lead to sameness and hinder the all important creative agent of "changing something new into ourselves". The weak and the thoughtless would bring down the level of consciousness closer and closer to the herd mentality. Anything that dilutes distinction and difference is anathema for Nietzsche.

We don't need to buy this argument and it is not borne out by the evidence. The so-called 'herd' has been the locus of much of the creativity of the past 50 years in fashion and music, for example. The integration of women and alternate lifestyles into mainstream culture has unleashed some pretty impressive creative alternatives. If Nietzsche were around now, he might be surprised at how much creative potential there is among groups that he pretty much dismissed. But his general criticism of modern society still has some teeth. The world of the marketplace is not sympathetic to what Nietzsche called the "joy instinct". We've already seen how different this joy instinct is from the happiness instinct. The former is as refined and subtle as the latter is crude and blunt. It requires two essential characteristics – distance and distinction. In order for the creative individual to create, there needs to be acute self-awareness and a degree of separation. These can occur in an egalitarian society, but only if they presume a certain amount of alienation from others.

In particular, and this characteristic runs completely counter to the dreams of an egalitarian society, the joy instinct unlike the happiness instinct, requires familiarity with pain. The primary of any egalitarian society is to diminish the pain of others. It cannot focus on personal bliss or what Nietzsche calls the "higher joys"; otherwise its emptiness would be exposed. The irony is that there is almost bound to be less 'joy' in an egalitarian than an unequalitarian society, even one with a considerable degree of pain. This is one of the paradoxes of modernity that Nietzsche exposes. Autonomy and security are opposites.

Nietzsche makes a penetrating assessment our modern world when he suggests that the price for a bliss that is really worthwhile is considerable personal pain. The modern creative person is going to be intermittently irritable and occasionally depressed.. Modernity is egalitarian only in a simplistic bovine functionality and this mentality is relatively unimportant for Nietzsche. It does not speak to the creative impulse of modernity, which only thrives to the extent that there is separation between individuals. Modern life is inherently lonely. We cannot really know, much less love one another. The love of our fellow man, and especially love between a man and a

woman, are effectively denied to those who seek to *dance* at their own tempo. In a sad comment on modern life, Nietzsche tells the story of the former footbridge between people that became problematic the moment that people had a ‘choice’ whether to cross the bridge or not. Individualism makes the future egalitarian society a false dream. Ironically, there was a more genuine connection between people in the unegalitarian societies of the past.

### **Dancing on Life’s Surface**

Happiness has always been elusive. Some of the greatest thinkers of antiquity, like Epicurus, cultivated the virtue of ‘superior prudence’ or coolness towards happiness that allowed for something like contentment. Nietzsche was occasionally tempted by that virtue but only because it affirmed the importance of pain. He found Buddhism attractive for much the same reason. As a quintessentially modern thinker, however, he recognized that contentment was unsuitable for modern life. The main characteristic of modern life, apart from individualism, was its superficiality. When Nietzsche talked about the superficiality of modern life, he wasn’t just referring to its lack of depth but to its lack of *essence*. Modern life is superficial because we operate on the surface only. There is nothing other than surface. Life has no other meaning than the meaning we give it; and that meaning must be personal and temporary. Nietzsche draws the conclusion that rightly makes him the acknowledged father and inspiration of existentialism.

The stark implications of the conclusion are clear enough, but they don’t address the issue of what one is to do in a world of surface. More important than what to do is the ‘attitude’ we take in doing it. Nothing is simple or easy in the modern world, so the attitude is going to be a complex combination of characteristics. Nietzsche liked to use the symbolism of the camel, the lion and the child. The camel represents the burden of old ideals shattered by modern rationalism. The lion represents the creative destruction of those values. Once the job of destruction is completed, the lion transforms into a child who learns to view fresh the new world. We should not confuse Nietzsche’s child with innocent or naïve ‘joy’. Rather, the childlike vision the mature stance, of a true individual who has worked through the tensions and who has the tenacity to wring bliss from a world of sorrow. The ‘joy of sorrow’ is one of Nietzsche’s favorite expressions; he uses it a lot to describe the kind of music he liked (i.e. Wagner’s *Tristan*); and it perhaps best reflects the self-inflicted suffering that one must go through to experience true joy.

Is the suffering worth the joy? For many people, of course, the answer would be no. Another question might be whether or not there comes an end to suffering. The answer, of course, is yes, if you consider that death is inevitable and that it ends suffering. A final, and more interesting question, given the fact that one cannot escape suffering and that some suffering is always necessary to maintain the tension that shows that we are alive, is there a set of habits that we can develop in order to mitigate the suffering somewhat?. Nietzsche always points to the importance of our willingness to accept life. Signs of this acceptance is the ability to laugh, to be silly, and

even sometimes to be a little bit “mad”. Of course, this is more difficult to do than it appears because we westerners have become very serious people indeed. We have lots of practice being serious, and relatively little in the *art of living*.

One of the surest indicators that we have become emancipated is that we stop looking in the rear view mirror, judging the present by the past. Nietzsche advises us to silence the “inner canon” that resists change, and to not merely embrace change but to be irritable towards the present. Habit is the mind killer of creative individualism and the sign that one is not yet free. The laughter of a truly free individual is so very different from the sneers and sarcasm of the critic. We moderns are skilled critics but poor creators.

### **The Artist**

Artists of old typically operated within systems of belief and at the service of the nobility. The nobility were the most authentic individuals of the past. When the old systems of belief and artificial hierarchies were destroyed by scientific rationalism, art and the artist were emancipated. The responsibility of the modern artist is to paint (figuratively) modern life and to generate new and more meaningful perspectives.. Art and artists become agents of change.

Nietzsche elevates the significance of art for life. But what did he mean by *art* and how did he conceive the *artist*. Nietzsche defined art in various ways because he did not want to get into the limiting trap of one single definition. Thus, his objection to the romantics was that they defined art as *beauty* and equated beauty with truth. At the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, contemporary realists limit art to what everybody experiences. They fail to appreciate that the appeal of a great deal of art, such as opera, lies in its *eloquent unnaturalness*. Nietzsche described rather than defined modern art as “good will to appearance”. What he meant by that was embracing creative autonomy in a superficial world.

Several qualities were necessary to putting a stamp of *goodwill to appearance*. Foremost among these was courage, because it takes courage to be autonomous. Freedom at the edge is simultaneously “rapturous” and a “burden”. It takes guts to “float above experience” and to refuse the security of the herd or the mainstream. In addition to courage, the artist requires a “clear conscience”. Obviously, this isn’t the ethical conscience of the past but the refusal to hide behind fads, fashions or the many other kinds of masks that society provides. Real art has to come from the *inside* if it is to be effective. Authenticity is much more important for Nietzsche than what we might call craftsmanship or talent. Finally, if authenticity is to mean anything, it has to reflect the experience of modern life. In particular, it needs to be reflective of pain, either the pain of life itself or the suffering that one must do to create meaningful art in a meaningless world. Artists for Nietzsche were change agents and in order to be a change agent you had to have an “independence of soul” that was rare. Real independence is not symbolic independence: it’s painful. You go to an awful lot of trouble, only to often be misunderstood or caricatured.

This clearly is an image of the alienated artist, the artist as a kind of lonely hero. As in any kind of heroic venture, Nietzsche sees two major temptations that one must overcome. Leaving aside the opinion of the herd, the immediate danger is that one will fall in love with one's own creations. Love is in the creating, not in the creation. The modern artist must never sacrifice his/her independence to a fossilized cultural product and must keep on growing. The genuine artist never realizes his or her dreams because they are just dreams and there is absolutely nothing to hold on to. You sacrifice your individuality and independence when you fall into beliefs of your own making. You can even become unhinged and go mad.

The second temptation involves others. The artist always communicates with an audience, even when the public is imagined or a public in the future. This imagined or real public for art differs from the herd that lacks the ability to appreciate art at all. But the modern western public – Nietzsche refers to it as the bourgeois public -- wants something from art that destroys the integrity of art and the artist. In order to relieve itself from its boring, mechanical, materialist existence, the modern public wants escape. Art in modern civilization plays the role of intoxicant or narcotic to reality whereas it should transcend that reality.

### **The Art of Living**

Whether or not you agree with Nietzsche about the importance and role of the modern artist, and it seems pretty clear that modern culture relies heavily on artistic people for meaning, there's a larger message about the *art of living* here that you might want to consider. "Be a man, be yourself" is Nietzsche's message. But what it means to be a modern man, or a woman, is not so straightforward. Modern life does not have meaning apart from the meaning that *you* give it. Many people want the *rapture* of freedom without the burden of responsibility for generating their own unique meanings. They look for meanings from others – their pastors, rabbis, teachers, philosophers – without the tension and suffering of working things out for themselves. Some latch on beliefs that serve their purposes and stick to them rigidly when they make no sense, in order to feel secure or have a sense of belonging. Others jump from fad to fad mindlessly without ever growing as individuals. It seems that the hardest thing to find, even in a university where we are supposed to explore ideas freely, is an authentic independent human being. What we find is a lot of people who anesthetize themselves from genuine living, choosing and creating meaning.

One of the sure signs of a lack of creativity in the present is the seriousness with which we take ourselves. Instead of the kind of 'self-sufficiency' that Nietzsche advocates, we have – and I include myself – a sense of self-importance. We are like upright pillars that remain rigid and impervious to impressions. We often pride ourselves on our 'goodness' -- or intelligence or rectitude -- when what we really mean is that we are afraid of is taking chances and doing anything wrong. We try to rid ourselves of the 'tension' that provides an opportunity for learning

and we try to ‘chill out’ everything into a comfortable formula. If anything shakes us out of our comfortable boredom, we always want to blame and criticize.

Nietzsche was not afraid to criticize, but it was always the prelude to creating for him. He didn’t much care for followers, but he really wanted ‘enemies’ who made him think and respond. His characteristic, besides spotting bullshit, was to look for the ‘heat’ in things that other people found ‘cool’ or took for granted. What Nietzsche challenges us to do is find meaning in things that otherwise have no meaning. Actually, ‘find’ is the wrong word, because meaning is not there until we put it there. So many of us swallow meaning from outside, or throw up the meanings that we don’t want to swallow. Nietzsche understood digestion. You have to chew before you swallow.

Most of us lack the courage or the clear conscience that Nietzsche thought was indispensable to art or artistic living. We are not willing to suffer even if it might allow us to “dance at a higher tempo”. We run away from any hint of pain or depression. We live in a society where ‘depression’ is a clinical illness to be fixed and pain is a swear word. I can say ‘fuck’ till the cows come home and you will just laugh, but if I said that more depression might be a good thing I may have to report to the thought police. Nietzsche, at any rate, thought that depression was a good thing, but he went mad in the end, so maybe all the pain avoiders were right. But then he wrote some pretty wonderful stuff before he went mad.

Let’s give Nietzsche the last word, ‘cause he’s so good with words:

Being honest in evil is still better than losing yourself to the morality of tradition, that a free human being can be good as well as evil, but that the unfree human being is a blemish upon nature and has no share in any heavenly or earthly comfort; finally that everyone who wishes to become free must become free from his own endeavor, and that freedom does not fall into any man’s lap as a miraculous gift.

### **Poetic Summation**

Nietzsche was a different kind of philosopher. He was so good at traditional philosophizing that he had a job as a professor in a German university when he was not much older than you. But traditional philosophy emphasizes rationality, something that Nietzsche respected because he hated stupidity, but something that he found incredibly limiting when it came to telling us how to live in the modern age. Nietzsche was all about health and vitality, and reasoning by itself didn’t give you that. He looked around him at western civilization and diagnosed it as sick to the core to the extent that people were either clinging to comfortable *reasons* or lamenting the fact that there were no good *reasons* for living.

The deepest insight of Nietzsche is that rationality can never provide a *rationale* for living. Human life is not something to be reasoned out; it is something to be *danced*. If life is an art,

then philosophy should be a poem. That's why Nietzsche's writing is deliberately poetic. If you spend too much time figuring out what he is saying, you miss the essential point. Nietzsche's objection to the father of western philosophy, Socrates, is that he took *thinking* far too seriously. He and his student Plato were suspicious of poets, and the latter went so far as to kick them out of his ideal *Republic*.

Science was just the latest version of Plato's as far as Nietzsche was concerned. One plausible interpretation Nietzsche's writing was that he wanted to bring poetry – words that dance -- back into the Western *Republic*. There is no better way of summing up Nietzsche's agenda than by quoting from the *Rhymes* that he places in front of Books I and II of *The Gay Science*. The first rhyme is an *Invitation* to think in new and modern ways:

Take a chance and try my fare:  
 It will grow on you, I swear;  
 Soon it will taste good to you.  
 If by then you should want more,  
 All the things I've done before  
 Will inspire things quite new?

Don't pay attention to what anyone else says, Nietzsche goes on, but have the courage to "dig deep and pry". He doesn't want you to dig too deeply into the thoughts of others in other times and places, but to "dig where you stand" and "follow your own self faithfully".

Self-sufficiency is key, but you have some idea where you are going. The place you are going says Nietzsche is the place where "the fool and the sage convene". What could he possibly mean by that? Why would one wish to be foolish? Why is the truly wise person willing to play the fool? What the ideals of the past and the threat from modern science tell us is that, while there may be truth-seeking, there is no such thing as truth. All values are human constructions. There are no *essences* that we can juxtapose to *appearances*. Everything is surface only. The point is to embrace life's superficiality, to give it your own personal meaning. The poem *For Dancers* puts it succinctly:

Smooth ice  
 Is paradise  
 For those who dance with expertise.

According to Nietzsche you have to grasp life, with all its thorns, and turn it into *you*. Otherwise, you are just somebody else's bitch.

For many people, i.e. the *herd*, being somebody else's bitch is exactly what they want, even if they don't say so. But Nietzsche thinks that such people are at best *necessary* and they have "narrow souls". It's better to have enemies than *cowtow* to the herd. Indeed, having enemies from time to time is a good thing. It stirs us out of our lethargy and makes us confront things rather than being ruled by things.

Better a whole-hearted feud

Than a friendship that is glued.

The point of artful living in the modern age is to reinterpret life for yourself. As the rhyme *Interpretation* suggests:

Interpreting myself, I always read

Myself into my books. I clearly need

Some help. But all who climb on their own way

Carry my image, too, into the breaking day.

The huge error that categorizes human history, especially in the West, is that we think we can find answers about the world and our selves. Our real situation is that there are no answers, no truths that we can depend upon. We are *wanderers* without a home:

"No path, abysses, death is not so still!" –

You wished it, left the path by your own will,

Now remain cool and clear, O stranger;

For you are lost if you believe in danger.

But then, that's the price of freedom – its burden. It's very easy for the "weary" and the "pessimistic" to become discouraged, no doubt. But that's what the "unfree man and woman" do'; it is not the approach of someone who is truly modern individual. The free man and woman knows that life is a game, so they play the game to the hilt. They generate meanings for themselves and out of themselves, even at the risk of burning themselves out in the process. The rhyme *Ecce Homo* spells it out:

Yes, I know from where I came!

Ever hungry like a flame.  
 Consume myself and glow,  
 Light grows all that I conceive,  
 Ashes everything I leave:  
 Flame I am assuredly.

Truly modern artists concur with Nietzsche, not necessarily because they have read him, but because they grasp what modernity is all about. Magazine, who we played at the beginning of last class, screams “the light pours out of me”. Neil Young proclaims that it is “better to burn out than to rust”. For Nietzsche and Neil Young, of course, there is a bit of hyperbole here. It may be prudent to acquire a little rust while you *light your fire*. The point, however, is to light your own fire.

As suggested in the last lecture, it takes considerable courage to light your own fire, because it is bound to deprive you of the warmth of the *herd*. But to the extent that you do your own fire starting, you will have access to joys that this “bellyaching” fraternity is deprived of. All insights, and by implication joys, are increased by distance from others and by tension. The price of creating your bliss is always going to involve pain. You may be disenfranchised from the herd, from familiar objects, your past, your present, your customary morals, and even from yourself. The journey of self-discovery or, rather, self-creation involves a completely new kind of moral dedication:

Called a star’s orbit to pursue,  
 What is that darkness, star, to you?  
 Roll on in bliss, traverse this age –  
 Its misery far from you and strange.  
 Let farthest world your light secure.  
 Pity is sin you must abjure.  
 But one command is yours. Be pure!



## ***The Gay Science: Lecture Two***

### **Yes-Saying**

“What I want is more; I am no seeker. I want to create for myself a sun of my own.”

### **A Decisive Turn in Western Thought**

Nietzsche marks a distinctive *turn* in Western thought. Previously, knowledge seeking in philosophy or in science was all about finding *truth* with the conviction that truth is somewhere out there. Philosophy and science, of course, rely on something called *reasons* to provide us with meanings. To be sure, there were always those – for convenience we can label them all as *romantics* – who critiqued rationalism from the point of view of feelings and aesthetics. Romantics were clear about the limitations of reasoning – that it subtracted something vital from life. The problem with the romantics, for someone like Nietzsche, is that, while they could let go of reason, they still clung to something called *truth*. The romantic artist tried to capture a truth that it called *beauty* and to set it on a pedestal as the ideal of life. The meaning of life is *art* that captures *beauty*. But what if life has no meaning and the perception of beauty is always changing? What is the implication for western truth seekers? Nietzsche rejects truth seeking, not only as futile but also a limiting. The men and women of the future should create their own truth and their own beauty.

One day, says Nietzsche in Book IV of *The Gay Science*, the seeker:

Slammed the door behind himself, stopped in his tracks, and wept. Then he said: “This penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent, certain – how it aggravates me! Why does this gloomy and restless fellow keep following and driving *me*? I want to rest, but he will not allow it. How much there is that seduces me to tarry! Everywhere Armida’s gardens beckon me; everywhere I must keep tearing my heart away and experience new bitternesses. I must raise my feet again and again, weary and wounded though they be; and because I must go on, I often look back in wrath at the most beautiful things that could not hold me – *because* they could not hold me.

Slammed the door behind him! What does that mean? It means that there is no truth; there is no home; there is no point to life; beautiful ideas and ideals keep changing. When the average person hears this, he or she feels homeless, gloomy and despondent. But Nietzsche suggests that this attitude is nothing more than a *prejudice*. The real *gloom makers* in western civilization are those who have imposed upon us this ideal of truth in all its various guises: wisdom, god, science and aesthetic rules. These are more than mistaken ideals; they are *idols* that get in the way of appreciating the possibilities, the *joy*, of living.

It would be simplistic and entirely wrong-headed to say that Nietzsche was *against* wisdom, god, science and beauty. There was much in philosophy, religion, science and romanticism that Nietzsche found positive. In particular, all these ways of knowing and appropriating reflected a life affirming creative

impulse. Truth isn't something *out there*; it is something that we create. Nietzsche respect for all those heroic cultural pioneers who had developed their *own* philosophy, their own religion, their own scientific paradigms, and beautiful constructs *out of themselves*. But none of these *values* were the truth. All of them were human constructions. They became real obstacles to living once these ideals were allowed to fossilize, tyrannize and to get in the way of creativity. The old *errors* might have been *necessary* for the creative people of the past, but they don't suit the modern present. Modernity for Nietzsche meant autonomy or freedom, it meant independence or choice; and choosing implies criticism or difference. It is not a question of right or wrong; the old ideals simply get in the way of a new mood or attitude:

But perhaps this error was as necessary for you then, when you were still a different person – **you are always a different person** -- as are all your present “truths”, being a skin, as it were, that concealed and covered a great deal that you were not yet permitted to see. What killed that opinion for you was your new life and not your reason; *you no longer need it*, and now it collapses and unreason crawls out of it into the light like a worm. When we criticize something, this is no arbitrary and impersonal event; it is, at least very often, evidence of vital energies in us that are growing and shedding a skin. We negate and must negate because something in us wants to live and affirm – something that we perhaps do not know or see as yet – This is said in favour of criticism.

Nietzsche categorized the mentality of the modern age as restless and critical. That is fine, but criticism by itself is a useless virtue. The real question is: if you are willing to tear things down, what are you going to put up in their place? Look at the structure of that last sentence. It gives *you* autonomous modern men and women permission to tear things down, but it asks *you* what *you as a free autonomous human being* are going to do now? **What are you going to do?**

*The Gay Science* is written primarily in aphorisms and metaphors, and for good reason. The definition of an aphorism is “a concise, pithy statement expressing a universal truth”. Only in Nietzsche's case the typical definition of aphorism is turned upside down – the universal truth is that there is no universal truth. Nietzsche deploys as many metaphors as he needs, including the camel, the lion and the child. But perhaps Nietzsche's most powerful metaphors for modern human life lived at the surface is the *wave*. Here's what he says:

How greedily this wave approaches, as if it were after something! How it crawls with terrifying haste into the inmost nooks of this labyrinthine cliff! It seems that something of value, high value, must be hidden there – And now it comes back, a little more slowly but still quite white with excitement; is it disappointed? Has it found what it looked for? Does it pretend to be disappointed? – But already another wave is approaching, still more greedily and savagely than the first, and its soul, too, seems to be full of secrets and the lust to dig up treasures. Thus live waves – thus live we who will – more I shall not say.

So? You mistrust me? You are angry with me, you beautiful monsters? Are you afraid that I might give away your whole secret? Will you be angry with me, arch your dangerous green bodies as high as you can, raise a wall between me and the sun – as you are doing it now! Truly, even now nothing remains of the world but green twilight and green lightening. Carry on as you like, roaring with overweening pleasure and malice – or dive again, pouring your emeralds down into the deep depths, and throw your infinite white mane of foam and spray over them: **Everything suits me, for everything suits you so well**, and I am so well-disposed toward you for everything; how could I think of betraying you? For – mark my word! – I know you and your secret, I know your kind! You and I – are we not of one kind? – You and I – do we not know *one secret*?

What is it about the forceful wave crashing into the cliffs that Nietzsche identifies with? What's the secret message? If I tell you the *secret*, it deprives you of the insight gleaned for yourself, doesn't it? But here you go. The waves represent life-affirming individuals who will never ever stop. Not because they will never find what they are looking for, but because of the "constant play in [their] life". Do you need me to make it even simpler? Dance and play like a wave over the surface of life.

To be sure, waves are temporary and life is "dispensable". That's not the point; it's only the starting point. Nietzsche's philosophy is all about vibrantly embracing and giving meaning to a life that has no meaning. Everyone, even members of the herd, have moments of vitality. The difference between a true Nietzschean and a member of the herd is that the former doesn't experience vitality as an accident or surprise, but *wills* it as a choice. You may not know that when Nietzsche wrote those lines about the wave, he was a sick man experiencing considerable pain. Nietzsche claimed in the fascinating Book IV of *The Gay Science* that he was joyful, not in spite of the pain, but *because of the pain*. The lesson that pain teaches, especially serious pain, is that life is a gift. Nietzsche calls pain his dog. A dog is not something you should fear; you should make your dog, your pain, fear you. Don't focus on avoiding pain. If you spend your life trying to avoid pain, you won't experience life at all.

### God is Dead

When Nietzsche advocates joy, laughter, and dancing – when he ridicules gravity or heaviness of body and soul – you should not mistake any of this for a frivolous approach to living in the modern age. Nietzsche understood better than most people the desire that people have for knowledge that is certain and to play a role in life that is meaningful. Western civilization prides itself on knowing things with certainty. Since the Enlightenment in particular, the West has promised to create an equal, rational and free society that is respectful of men and women and productive of their happiness. Writing in the 1880s, at the cusp of intellectual discontent and a crisis of meaning, Nietzsche points out that we are "*neither as proud nor as happy as we might be*". Being happy was not a straightforward or simple agenda. Knowledge, in the form of modern science, turned human beings into accidents. How do you breathe "a beautiful meaning and a soul into an accident"? (243)

The traditional solution to the crisis of modern meaning, and one that still resonates today, is spirituality. It still worked for Dostoyevsky, although it is significant that Dostoyevsky believed that we needed to look for God inside our souls rather than outside in religious institutions. This traditional solution, even recast as inner spirituality, clearly was not acceptable to Nietzsche who uttered the famous dictum *God is dead*. Nietzsche's interpretation of modernity is that you can never go back; you can never go home; there is no spiritual safety net that is meaningful any more. You are on your own. Suck it up.

Nietzsche's rejection of religion is probably the most misunderstood component of his philosophy. The son of a minister, Nietzsche understood the attraction of religion. While he doesn't show a lot of respect for religious institutions, he admires the great individuals of religion. He shows a lot of respect for religious prophecy and his literary style in works like *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* often imitates an old testament prophet or religious mystic. Nietzsche was not even concerned about the validity of religion; unlike some of the scientific types of his age, he was not the slightest bit interested in proving that religion is bogus or superstition. For Nietzsche, everything is bogus; it's just a matter of picking your poison. The debate between science and religion in the nineteenth-century (and today) simply bored Nietzsche except for the one characteristic of modern religion that he saw as pervasive. People had quite simply stopped believing in God. That's not an entirely accurate description of the Nietzschean insight; what he really saw was that religious belief was no longer relevant.

Before we discuss what Nietzsche might mean by relevant, let's take a short detour from what you read in *The Gay Science* to explore his critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Typically, Nietzsche wasn't interested in whether religious truths have any validity. No truths had validity for Nietzsche; it was always a question of vitality. The characteristic he found irritating about Jewish and Christian beliefs was their lack of heroic vitality. Phrases like "love your neighbor" and "the meek shall inherit the earth" bothered Nietzsche because they seemed to legitimize a passive approach to life and an active approach to death. It is not that love and meekness lacked meaning, but for Nietzsche these are the meanings of life's losers. More important, meekness and charity too easily support the *herd instinct*. You are supposed to care more about others than yourself. These are not the qualities of a free and individualistic society; they bind the most creative and energized few to the needs and desires of the many. Meekness and charity lead to conformity; they bringing everyone down to the same level.

Nietzsche had problems with Judaism, which he viewed as the religion of losers who were full of spite towards their Roman superiors. Some of his comments on Jews were used as ammunition for anti-Semitism in Europe. It would be misleading to label him an anti-Semite, however, because he found Christianity even more distasteful. At least the Jewish prophets demonstrated vitality and at least they hoped for an earthly paradise. They demonstrated the will to live. Christians for Nietzsche were consummate death worshippers. Everything Christianity defined as good was focused on the afterlife. Christians were better at propaganda than the Jews, although they were still Jewish at their core, and they crafted a picture of human/earthly life as ugly and sinful. Nietzsche claimed that Christianity made individuals feel guilty for living and sinful for seeking joy on earth. It was not that Christians completely denied the existence of joy. But the only kind of joy that orthodox Christianity recognized as legitimate was the selfless satisfaction of a person that knew he or she was a sinner. Nietzsche continually

contrasted Christian joy – what he called the joy of slaves – with the creative joy of the Greeks who loved themselves and could only tolerate a polytheistic religion that allowed them as much room to display themselves as the supreme individuals that they were.

Whether or not you agree with this analysis -- and Nietzsche himself was not dismissive of all Jewish and Christian *visionaries* but only the overall tendency of these religious perspectives – they illuminate Nietzsche's obsession with affirming life on its own terms. Transforming human life that is an accident into something "essential, universal and eternal" was something that he personally found *nauseating*" (167). Modern life for Nietzsche is creative chaos. But that's far from his most devastating criticism of modern religion. The problem of modern religion is not one of truth but one of belief. Belief should be a strong and personally affirming emotion. One's beliefs, after all, are who one is. The true Christian of the past went through life "with the dignity of a great matador" (178). When you read a Christian book by someone like Saint Augustine, you can always count on understanding religious feeling better. The greatest Christians were also the great dreamers. Christian dreams may not have been particularly to his personal liking, but Nietzsche respected the fact that the great Christians of the past really knew how to dream. Modern Christians on the other hand go through life like sleepwalkers. There's no vitality in their religion. Their religion is at best a crutch, at worst a bad habit. While habits occasionally can be useful, bad habits detract from living.

Nietzsche's grievance against modern religion is that it is a pathetic *shadow* of the vibrant religions of the past. Whether modern individuals believe what they profess or not, their belief does not inform their lives. What bugs Nietzsche even more than the shallowness of modern belief is that most people don't even realize that it is just the symptom of cultural decay. Nietzsche's madman comes into the modern world, suitably defined as a marketplace, holding a lantern and crying "I seek God! I seek God." Those who don't believe – presumably those of tepid belief just stand by saying nothing just like they do today – laugh at him:

Has he got lost? Asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? Asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? – Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumps into the crowd who he *penetrates with his eyes* and speaks the most devastating words that one could ever speak about the death of spirituality:

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we

smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,

The fact of whether God is dead is not a truth question. It is a question of living a meaningful life. If we get rid of God, we'd better replace him if we want to make our lives meaningful. Replace him with what? Nature? Nature says Nietzsche is just a god substitute without any obvious human relevance. Science? Science is no more than an explanatory mechanism and it doesn't explain much. It can't even explain its own core teaching, i.e. that an effect must have a cause, because it can't explain a 'push'. The downside of modern science is its tendency to turn humans into machines and life into chaos.

Science is not the answer. It is useful only as a debunker of the truths that we cling to. Even that which we call modern knowledge – substance, extension, cause and effect – are not *real things* but ways of organizing our existence. The real message that we should take from science's modern demolition job is that we *create* our reality, and typically in ways that affirm species life. Our lives are but a *dream* and we are *dreamers of the day*. So let's dream with vitality.

### **The Individual and the Herd**

If meanings are multiple and transitory, then one conclusion should be apparent – we are free to create our own meanings. Modern man and women can no longer rely on the *meanings* of the past to make life meaningful. We have to create new meanings. What was decisive against Christianity, says Nietzsche, was not the debunking of science. It is a matter of *fashion* or *taste*. Being religious, genuine spirituality, does not suit our modern individualistic mood. We have to be able to transform ourselves to fit that mood. Nietzsche's philosophy is one of existential freedom. Like all existential philosophy, it implies that you have some responsibility for making your life meaningful. That requires the strength and courage, as Nietzsche says, to "create new eyes that are even more our own" (192)

Nietzsche sounds like a 'free spirit' at times, but he is anything but a hippy. What you need in order to *create new eyes* is strength. Even in an ostensibly free society, the instinct of the herd – the vast majority of people – is for stability. The herd has two strategies. The preferred one is to remain always the same; a secondary strategy is to blindly 'follow' a leader. Any leader will do for the herd; the important thing is that he or she appears to be leading. What the herd dislikes is real freedom, although they are content to follow shiny simulacra of freedom in which they can perform as 'functions' like many of today's proponents of *liberty* in the United States. Their real motivation is a secret desire to be enslaved. The greatest fear of the herd is death, because death cancels out the only kind of happiness that they can appreciate – security and contentment. So they push ideas of death under the carpet rather than really living. Nietzsche's dislike of the herd is palpable but, like everything in Nietzsche, not monolithic. Without the herd, it is doubtful that the modern individual could survive. Habits, comforts and security are needed as refuges for free individuals, even though these can never provide more than temporary shelter for individuals without a home. Truly free individuals are "always only in our own company" only in an ideal sense; in many aspects of ordinary life we do not always stand apart. The species life or common life is necessary to keep free spirits from spiraling off into *madness* or what Nietzsche calls the "hollow echo".

More crucially, the herd provides the contrast, the tension, for the individual to explore what is possible in any age. While the herd may *necessary*, however, the Nietzschean individual is always apart. Maintaining distance and creating difference is the Nietzschean stance. In order to expand this distance, he has some very interesting rules of interaction that you may find useful when dealing with people that you think are stupid like parents, professors or peers. The first and most often repeated injunction is to avoid the trap of pitying the herd. It's easy to feel sorry for people, especially, people who seem to have your best interests at heart. And it takes guts to hurt significant others by disagreeing with their view of what's best for you. But you've got to remember is that the status quo – the representatives of the herd – rarely want you to be special. All their efforts are directed at getting you to mimic what they regard as *normal* behavior. They are not fans of exceptional behavior, precisely because they are not themselves exceptional. Nietzsche was a professor and a highly regarded one. He was one of the youngest and most successful professors in Germany. But he didn't think that it was a particularly interesting profession or group of people on the whole. Don't admire and don't pity those kinds of people; don't waste too much time on them; concentrate on yourself. Be selfish.

Many times you have to protect yourself from the herd. That means engaging in all sorts of behavior that might make ordinary people feel guilty. Communication with the herd is fraught with dangers, because they are on the lookout for who believes they can do better or who strives to be unique. You need to learn to flatter or to practice dishonesty with the herd with a good conscience. Don't give yourself away. Protect your personal power. Keep your powder dry. Ultimately, if greatness is what you seek, there will come a time to take on the herd. Greatness always wants to act – to strut its stuff. The kind of pride that Nietzsche advocates is recognizably modern. It's all about personal rather than institutional power. It's about becoming a sublime and supreme individual. The elites of old displayed their pride outwardly and boisterously. Kings and nobles wanted nothing more than to demonstrate physical power over others. That is less possible and even dangerous in an age where the herd has considerably more clout than in times past. So Nietzsche occasionally cautions against too much self-applause, even in solitude. But a guy who wrote chapters to books entitled "Why I am So Clever" clearly can't always keep his ego in his pants. The Nietzschean strategy that works best is being able to "laugh" at others. You can do this internally; in fact it is usually wise to do so. You don't necessarily have to be mean when you laugh at others. But you shouldn't mind that there is a mischievous delight in knowing that you are *dancing to a higher tempo*. Of course, it is also useful to laugh at oneself, especially when one catches oneself behaving like the herd. These kinds of laughter, says Nietzsche, were well known to the Greeks but totally foreign to Christianity.

Nietzsche thinks that you can't simultaneously subscribe to the imperative to love your neighbor and to love yourself. He suggests that true individuals must love themselves first and only love others to the extent that they can incorporate them into their own creative vision. Loving an 'other' for his or her own sake makes absolutely no sense to Nietzsche. Lots of people living today might agree with 'love yourself first' strategy. But they would likely tone down one aspect of self-love that Nietzsche finds indispensable. You only come to realize and love yourself by contrast with the herd. Self-love always involves a certain amount of maliciousness towards most others. And for that, says Nietzsche, you should never feel guilty.

The quality that once made religion meaningful is *faith* in God. The modern equivalent quality is faith in oneself. The modern individual lives on the cutting edge of meaning and always orients himself or herself to the future. The herd finds security in reflected meanings and orients itself towards a simplistic version of the past. The herd can be most useful to the creative individual by illuminating the contemporary limits to a freer future. The herd can even provide inspiration to the extent that an individual seeks to communicate their personal vision of what is new and vibrant in modern life to ideal 'others'. Thus, many artists seek to challenge expectations and enlarge the horizons of others. The most important principle of self-defense, however, is never to seek the approval of the herd. To adopt modern terminology, to the extent that herd engages the creative productions of modern individuals, it inevitably seeks to **co-opt** them. What the herd does with artistic creations is its own business. The mission of the artist is to look forward, not sideways and certainly not backwards.

### The Artist-Philosopher

The anti-herd individual, or artist-philosopher, as Nietzsche wants to call him creates himself out of herself. In a sense, that is impossible. It would be more accurate to say that the artist-philosopher creates himself out of the 'difference' between himself and the herd. Even that difference plays a relatively limited role when it comes to deep individualism and creativity. For that, you require tension between yourself and other unique artist-philosophers. Always, you pursue the process of distancing and differentiating yourself. You may make a few friendships and deep connections along the way, but this process of constant differentiation affirms *alienation*. The modern artist-philosopher is a solitary being. Feuds and frictions between people with an artistic temperament have probably always existed, but they are inevitable in the modern age. Nietzsche, for example, first praised but then attacked the composer Richard Wagner for not being modern enough and for pandering to bad taste of the militaristic Prussian masses.

What is distinctly modern perpetual alliances and disagreements is that deep relevance and meaning now attaches itself to **moments** of inspiration. Nietzsche's ideal artist-philosopher is not looking to capture and reflect universal meanings but to make moments deeply meaningful. Nietzsche believed that Wagner achieved this kind of moment – this creative perfection – in the opera *Tristan*, where he uniquely captured the beauty of a sorrow that sensitive solitary people can appreciate best – the joy of sorrow of the sublime soul. He argued that Wagner relinquished artistic creativity in his epic operas by pandering to the German bourgeois taste for spectacle and bombast. Art as a narcotic for herd like spectators! The most important creations of modern artist-philosophers are seldom are rarely appreciated by the herd, at least not in the artist's lifetime:

"Your life does not reach men's ears; your life is silent for them, and all the subtleties of its melody, all tender resolutions about following or going ahead remain hidden from them. True, you do not approach on a broad highway with regimental music, but that does not give these good people any rights to say that your way of life lacks music. Let those who have ears hear!"



The modern artist-philosopher “wants to conquer a country that nobody has possessed and scarcely anyone has even seen.” (213)

One of Nietzsche’s favorite words – and it reflects just how modern he is – is **new**. You can’t reproduce the dreams of others; you are not even allowed to replicate yourself. You must constantly reach out for the new and original. It is this characteristic that makes the artist-philosopher a new cultural phenomenon for Nietzsche. The artist of old had no qualms about copying the skills, techniques and innovations of others. Artistic styles and fashions changed so gradually that there a sense of continuity prevailed. Craftsmanship was valued at least as much as innovation, usually much more. But the kind of modern art that Nietzsche is describing incorporates the existential philosophical principle; it must always “move beyond”. That’s why Nietzsche uses the term artist-philosopher rather than the more conventional term *artist*. After Nietzsche, it’s never enough to be talented or popular or fashionable as an artist. Artistic creations must reflect the artist’s unique conception of life.

In a world that science and philosophy has demonstrated to be *unreal* and devoid of meaning, the artist has the difficult but immensely exiting task of exploring new and individual meanings. Older meanings need no longer apply. The group who more than any other elevated the role of the modern artist – whether poet, novelist, painter or composer – was the romantics. By the time we get to Baudelaire, romantic art is passé. For Nietzsche, the romantic focus on beauty was a limitation to artistic creativity. The romantic obsession with *capturing* nature and human nature was totally misplaced, because there is no nature that could ever act as an anchor for modern art. “Art” by definition is “a deviation from nature” and a “lofty, heroic unnaturalness and convention.” The artist creates beauty where no beauty exists. More accurately, the artist continually defines and redefines what beauty is. Finally, the artist is not so much concerned with what is beautiful as what is *interesting*.

### **Art: The *Cult of the Untrue***

Art aestheticizes experience. Without art, life would be intolerable for Nietzsche. Although he occasionally refers to the *art of living*, Nietzsche is big on the role of the artist as cultural producer. It is to the productions of the artist that we look for examples – not models – of modern seeing and listening and living. This emphasis on the artist might seem excessive, but there can be little doubt that late modernity elevates the artist as the supreme individual apart. We see it in music, where people like Radiohead or Sigur Ross are much more than entertainment. If you simply regard them as entertainment, you miss the point entirely. And people who care about music watch artists Radiohead and Sigur Ros from a recognizably Nietzschean perspective for confirmation that they are evolving as artists and avoiding the contagion of the herd.

What is at stake in creating and judging modern art is nothing less than “independence of soul”. Without the cultural signs and symbols produced from this rarified air of independence, Nietzsche thinks that modern life would be meaningless. The function art serves for sensitive modern men and women with creative potential should be twofold. First, it should allow us to endure the superficiality of life. Second, it should encourage us to dance or play. All art is serious play. Independence of soul does not come cheaply. The artist should have to suffer for his or her art. Since all art is produced from contrast,

the artist needs to feel conflict, whether from the herd or inside oneself. The wellspring of creativity is always going to involve tension, criticism and a degree of suffering – whether imposed from the outside or explored within oneself.

How do you stimulate suffering or emo characteristics in yourself? To the extent that we are all somewhat Nietzschean, we already know how to do this. First, you oppose the judgments of the herd and seek your own path. Second, you hold your weaker self, the self that leads to absorption in the herd, in contempt. You fight against anything that gets in the way of your independence. You would rather give up everything than destroy the source of your unique creativity. You practice and perfect this and other kinds of interiorization. You get better and better at exploring and expressing “the very small microscopic features of your soul”. This kind of interiorization – what literary theorists of the novel term the *road interior* – provides never ending and richly rewarding sources of artistic inspiration that do not rely, at least not unduly, on the acknowledgement or appreciation of the herd. Internal exploration has a built in creativity mechanism because it involves a degree of suffering. Just look at Dostoyevsky’s underground man, or the history of Joy Division’s lead singer Ian Curtis, who for me embodies Nietzsche’s ideal of the *joy of sorrow* in modern music.

I hear humanist critic of Nietzsche talking here. “You say,” Mister Nietzsche, “that there is no intrinsic human nature to discover” and no values either good or bad to discover in human consciousness. Yet notions like the *joy of sorrow* seem to indicate the fundamentally tragic quality of human life and the need to find something common in human experience.” Thus, Nietzsche inadvertently invokes a brotherhood of man, even if it is only in our common fate. Now, Nietzsche is not always consistent but he doesn’t like words like *fate*. No really creative person believes in fate or chance and *belief is everything*. Nietzsche also distinguishes between the limited possibilities for the artist right now and more open horizons of the artist of the future. At present, it is to be expected that pain and suffering would be *the* major catalyst for art. The contrast between our traditional meaningful ideals and our present meaningless condition is experienced as painful by sensitive souls. The modern self of 1880s was a self-consciously suffering self. Artists still needed to teach themselves how to dance in a superficial world of appearance. Joy was wrung with considerable difficulty out of pain. That does not mean, however, that the artist of the future would have the same attitude.

Life always involves pain; there is no getting away from it. Pain will always be useful a contrast to pleasure for creative people. But the debilitating psychic pain of a civilization experiencing a crisis of meaning can and should be a temporary stage. Affirming life certainly would be different for individuals who had transcended such a crisis. Life would be different for the Nietzsche’s **superman**. Pain would still exist, but it would be refined pain, controlled from the inside rather than felt as generations of voices from the outside.

### Übermensch

The concept of the *superman* or *ubermensch* emerges naturally from Nietzsche’s philosophy. (Mensch, by the way, refers to mankind, so the superman is more gender neutral than might first appear.) Nietzschean philosophy always points to the *new*; it is focused on the future. Nietzsche had a pretty big

ego, but he didn't think of himself as a type of superman. Like others of his time, he recognized that he carried the burden of the decay of old ideals, even if he was dismantling those ideals. You can only escape your culture to a degree. Nietzsche always felt that he was preparing the foundation for a future where free creative individuality would shine much more brightly. True individuals would emerge who could create new visions of what it meant to be human, without the dead weight of the European past hanging over them. Free creative spirits would be *well disposed towards life and towards themselves*.

The superman is the supremely confident and creative human being. This notion has next to nothing in common with the Arian type that the Nazi's constructed. Although the fascists highjacked some of Nietzsche's language concerning the superman, the monstrosity that they constructed was anything but a freely creative being. Nazi ideology represents the worst side of the herd mentality – when the herd blindly follows leaders who reinforce their narrowest prejudices. Defending Nietzsche against the charge of propping up fascism has been done *ad nauseum*. We can spend the time we have left better by describing Nietzsche's very different vision of a future where supermen and superwomen have influence. True supermen -- what he calls "individuals of elevated moods" or the "incarnation of great moods" -- have yet appear on modernity's scene. History offers us no examples, only hints, of the kind of freely creative person that might be:

Nevertheless history might one day give birth to such people, too – once a great many favorable preconditions have been created and determined that even the dice throws of the luckiest chance could not bring together today. What has so far entered our souls only now and then as an exception that makes us shudder, might perhaps be the usual state for these future souls: a perpetual movement between high and low, the feeling of high and low, a continual ascent as on stairs and, at the same time a sense of resting on clouds (231).

These 'self-sufficient' individuals would radiate real joy that today only surfaces as intermittent exuberance. All their energies would be directed towards creating artistic life out of themselves without "the petty weeds of grief and chagrin" that encumber the current generation.

These *sublime* men and women of the future will exude real "style". They will have the capacity to:

Survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.

The self-sufficient supermen of the future will eclipse the most creative individuals of the past. These former *noble* types could only practice creativity and obtain pleasure by dominating others and dominating nature. By this, they demonstrated that they were *dissatisfied with themselves*. But the superman demonstrates complete self-control and absolute delight in herself. The noble souls of the past were well-disposed towards life and living and creating, but not so well-disposed towards themselves. The supermen and women of the future will genuinely love themselves. And that light will pour out of them.

If the history of mankind demonstrates any truth, says Nietzsche, it is that people are not equal and don't want to be the same as everyone else. The bloody history of mankind has been a sorry spectacle of just how irrelevant ethics is. Everyone wants to set themselves up as something apart. Everyone has grievances and everyone is quick to spot injustice towards herself. Even among those who want to acquire knowledge, not objects or persons, the rules of the game are criticism and contradiction. In everything, the feeling of superiority -- not equality -- dominates. The lived experience is very different for creative individuals and for herd members. In the past, a dialectic emerges in which the former attempt to dominate while the latter attempt to bring as many people down to the same level. Herd culture can be petty and vindictive, but at the end of the day inevitably affirms 'stability' and 'comfort', which is how we recognize that bourgeois individualism is really a version of herd culture and not liberation.

Modern society, however, offers cultural possibilities for the emergence of the superman that the herd societies of the past did not. What Nietzsche finds "really great, new and amazing" in modern culture is:

the ability to contradict, the attainment of a good conscience when one feels hostile to what is accustomed, traditional, and hallowed. (297)

The litmus test of a liberated society, where the superman will come to be recognized as a higher type, would be one in which individuals feel that they have the capacity to "make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?" And lest you miss the Nietzschean point, he adds "And I rather think that in themselves they never are".

The superman of the future will revel in the *cult of the unreal*. He/she -- "the higher human being" -- will accustom herself to continually oscillate between being a spectator of, and actor in, the theatrical drama that is life. This supreme and sublime individual will have distinctive style, will transform himself into a work of art. He or she will constantly be fashioning something, looking to create "something that had not been there before". The superman will engage in constant self-discovery, continual *overcoming* of the old self with an emphasis on the new. To the extent that supermen would fashion the culture of the future, the herd and its ethic of comfort would become irrelevant.

Since self-control and self-discovery are the hallmarks of the superman of the future, the need to control objects and others would become irrelevant. A person who is content in himself might be mischievous towards others but there is no need to be malicious. Nietzsche wants us to recognize that this increase in good will towards others has nothing whatsoever to do with Christian charity or traditional ethics. It is the healthy perspective of a person who really appreciates himself, is focused on his own bliss, and doesn't care what anyone else does. But there's a price to be paid for this self-content and self-sufficiency; you can't ever rest and you can never find a home. You are always on the move. "You are always a different person." Nothing can hold you. You must always be re-inventing yourself. You stop when you are dead. Or, if you stop, you are as good as dead.

Nietzsche is a recognizably modern philosopher and obviously ahead of his time, which is why he continues to be so relevant. Even if you don't really understand him, you can feel the supreme individualism in his writing. The new morality of creative vitality that he espouses can be summed up in

some recognizably modern slogans – ‘keep on growing’ comes to mind. And while his concept of the superman seems a tad farfetched, the idea that “something new is always waiting at the door” for the really creative individual seems a fitting comment on our way of life. Bourgeois comfort is not sufficient; we disdain it if only secretly; we must always be pursuing new fads and fashions that allow ample scope for creative individuals to aestheticize their and our lives. That the styles and products of creative individuals are often caricatured and co-opted does not alter the fact that creativity is a pre-eminent feature of modern life.

I often wonder what Nietzsche would think of our current world. He might be more positive than you would think. The shallowness and superficiality of modern life – the thing that bothers most serious minded people – likely wouldn’t trouble him. Life for him is surface only. There is considerably more room for creative individuals to thrive in our society. Traditional and herd values may have more clout than he would like, but the individual no longer feels oppressed by “the opposition of many millennia”. (238) The way Nietzsche defined a society conducive to the rise of supermen was as follows:

The world becomes ever fuller; ever more fishhooks are cast in his direction to capture his interest; the number of things that stimulate him grows constantly, as does the number of different kinds of pleasure and displeasure.

One day, says Nietzsche, *the great liberator*, the superman came to him and described the vital life:

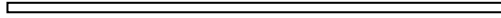
Life could be an experiment of the seeker for knowledge – and not a duty, not a calamity, not trickery. – And knowledge itself: let it be something else for others; for example, a bed to rest on, the way to such a bed, or a diversion, or a form of leisure – for me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings, too, find places to dance and play. “Life as a means to knowledge” – with this principle in one’s heart one can live not only boldly but even gaily, and laugh gaily, too. And who knows how to laugh anyway and live well if he does not first know a good deal about war and victory?”

## Concluding Remarks

Nietzsche was a mover and shaper whose ideas continue to shape our modern consciousness. I think that there is a great deal of contemporary life that Nietzsche would consider an improvement on his own society. We might have more fake than real individuals around, but we have developed into a society where “great individuals” obviously can strive even thrive. The herd will always be around, but it has far less influence than formerly. We have an abundance of free-spirited artist-philosophers. And, with the world-wide-web, we can assimilate their products and profit from their example like never before. There is the richest variety of different lifestyles in history, and some of them involve living dangerously and close to madness. Nietzschean ideas and ideals abound in literature, art and music, sometimes quite explicitly. You can pick up a rock cd, for example *The Thirteenth-Floor Elevators*, and read about the songs’ Nietzschean lyrics. Lots of university students are proud to call themselves Nietzscheans, even when they don’t really know what that means. In science fiction television

programs, we find people calling themselves Nietzscheans, but we shouldn't waste too much energy trying to figure out why.

Since so many characteristics of the modern world can be linked to Nietzsche, a more interesting question to ask might be: "what more than anything else gets in the way of living boldly, dangerously and creatively?" Different obstacles will impact different people differently. One obstacle is a holdover from the traditional world and its Judeo-Christian ethical imperatives. Many people still feel guilty about feeling good. The herd-instinct asserts itself in the form of telling us that we don't *deserve* to feel special. It's only o.k. to feel special to the extent that other people tell you that you're special. A second obstacle is our attitude towards pain. In the past, pain was mainly defined as physical; in the present we are obsessed with pain that is mental. Depression for many people is a negative to be analyzed or medicated rather than Nietzsche's wellspring of creativity. The third obstacle, and the one that I see as the contagion of modern youth, is the penchant for whining. Whining is always focused on bad things outside of you, rather than the interesting possibilities inside of you. Whining makes independent creativity next to impossible. Nietzsche's philosophy can be summed up in 3 rules: 1) aim to be special, especially to yourself; 2) use pain creatively; if you don't know pain, you don't know joy; and 3) take responsibility for your own joy, don't blame others. Or, here's a Dwyer spin on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule. Whining is permitted, as long as you whine creatively.

**Aphorisms**A large empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for writing aphorisms.

## *The Dharma Bums: Lecture One*

### **A Change of Scene**

With *The Dharma Bums*, we leave the claustrophobic and haunted summer house to experience the fresh air of the Sierra Leone mountains. The move from pre-war Britain to postwar America represents the replacement of an aging civilization by a more youthful and optimistic one. America in the 1950s was just coming into its own as a superpower while the British sphere of influence was shrinking. Optimism, movement and change characterize *The Dharma Bums*; the mood of *To the Lighthouse* is distinctly pessimistic.

But we should not exaggerate the differences because, after all, both books are modern. The term *modern* implies: 1) lonely individuals navigating a society that they did not create; 2) the life of a wanderer or tourist without a home; 3) meanings that are never given but that need to be continually constructed; 4) consequently, lives that are lived as *moments* rather than destinations; and finally 5) a preoccupation with death, chaos, emptiness or the abyss that always lies just behind the horizon. Youth, however, tends to focus on life's positives. And America was young in 1958 when Jack Kerouac composed *The Dharma Bums*.

Kerouac had already published *On the Road* by 1958, the book that made him famous but did not make him rich. Since it is better known than *The Dharma Bums*, it might be useful to talk about it briefly here. The hero of *On the Road* is Dean Moriarty, in real life, Jack Cassidy and a close friend of Kerouac. Dean Moriarty breathes adrenalin, living life to the fullest by driving his car across America in search of new experiences, drinking like a fish and loving like a lothario. *On the Road* allowed Kerouac to use to maximum benefit a new style of immediacy, spontaneity, and that energized and in your face style that belied the hard work involved in its development. It's a style that continues in *The Dharma Bums*. Many contemporary critics considered the style sloppy, lazy, production line writing. It certainly couldn't be more different than Virginia Woolf's careful, pruned, precise and qualified kind of prose. Arguably, however, it reflects much better the *rush* of modern life.

*On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* are also similar in so far as they construct a recognizably modern kind of hero – the *rebel*. Dean Moriarty is the rebel without a cause that inspired dozens of James Dean types so popular in 1950s pop culture. The problem with Dean Moriarty that is corrected in *The Dharma Bums* is not simply that he has no ultimate life destination – that's a modern problem that many share – but that he has no direction. The hero of *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy Ryder, in real life Gary Snyder the well known Zen poet, is not just a rebel but a rebel with a cause. What that cause is and, especially, why we should take it seriously, is the theme of the book. It doesn't matter whether you agree with Japhy Ryder or Ray Smith (alias Jack Kerouac) as much as you understand the challenge and the responsibility of making modernity meaningful.



### **Titles (and Dedications!) Are important**

The title of the book is *The Dharma Bums* and it is dedicated to Han Shan. What does that tell you? Books are usually dedicated to living or recently dead people. Han Shan was a Buddhist monk and poet who lived centuries ago and whose poems Japhy Ryder is translating at a California university. Why this thank you to a long dead guy from a completely different time and culture? The poem Japhy is working on, called “Climbing Up Cold Mountain Path”, is difficult to translate into English because it records an experience without a narrative. The poet is not talking about his trip up a mountain centuries ago; he’s experiencing the mountain – its boulders, canyon, vegetation – on its own terms. The person or the individual looking at the scene almost disappears and a quite different, selfless, kind of reality emerges. It’s a reality without judgment, without qualification, without comparison and without the intrusion of a human being. “Wow” says Ray Smith. Why wow? What’s so important about a poem that simply says:

Cold Mountain path goes on and on, long gorge choked with scree and boulders, wide  
creek and mist-burned grass, moss is siippery though there’s been no rain, pine sings  
but there’s no wind...

Nothing much so far. But then comes Han Shan’s existential question. “who can leap the world’s ties and sit with me among the white clouds?” (14)

We’ll come back to the deep meaning embodied in Zen poetry. Let’s deconstruct the book’s title. Dharma ostensibly refers to the teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni or the “enlightened one” who lived in India over 2,500 years ago. Those teachings were written down in Sutras like ‘The Diamond Sutra’ and deal with topics like suffering, the cycle of birth and life, renunciation of the world’s values, and compassion for humanity. Much more important than the details, however, is that Dharma means a fundamental truth that you have to discover for yourself. There is a Buddhist saying: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!” The teachings of the Buddha are only the description of an enlightened mind. Truth can be expressed in many different ways precisely because it is a highly personal experience. The Dharma’s general form is something like ‘there is neither real nor unreal, good or bad, love or hate, pain or pleasure, danger or safety’. Those are just mental concepts, discriminations that obscure a higher reality that is fundamentally *empty*.

The primary lesson of Buddhism is that we construct meanings that inevitably end up torturing us to the extent that we ‘buy into’ them. While we cannot avoid making meanings, and some meanings are obviously very useful, if we understand that we are not our meanings, we can experience moments of freedom. Buddhism ultimately suggests that we can escape the world of meanings altogether and join with emptiness and the void that is called *nirvana*. There are lots of variations on how to get past what some Buddhists call the *gateless barrier* and even more on what we will experience when we go beyond, momentarily or permanently. But everyone agrees on the technique to get there. It’s meditation, which is focusing on nothing or one thing that allows us to suspend mental discriminations. What is this thing that we are suspending? It’s

ourselves. It's our idea of ourselves. It's the self itself. In Buddhism there is no self. There are no *others* either.

Are you beginning to see why Buddhism might be attractive to ultra-modern individuals? Let's go back for a moment to the poem "Climbing Up Cold Mountain Path". It's a Zen Buddhist poem. Zen Buddhism takes the simplest and most direct path to personal liberation. It plays games with words. Instead of words being invested with all kinds of meanings, Zen turns words, and the concepts they represent, up, down, sideways, always in order to hint at a deeper truth or a different awareness. The 'sound of one hand clapping' is an example. Seemingly silly answers to questions about the meaning of life – 'Just drink your tea' – is another. Haiku poems that force you to confront rather than analyze reality – 'The frog jumps into the water – splash' are another. The entire point of these exercises is to get your long suffering and self-important self out of the frame.

I hope this isn't too abstract. Zen masters don't like to talk about this stuff. Talking is the no-mind killer. They'd prefer that you meditate, and they'll bully you with koans or riddles only when they think you might be ready for a change of perspective. So, if you don't get this, my advice to you is to concentrate on nothing for a minute or two – and I do mean nothing – and see if it gets you anywhere. If you don't, it doesn't matter. If Zen's not your thing, you can focus on the other half of the title, which is *Bums*. Zen's an oriental religion, but bums are an American institution. To mainstream society, the term *bum* means a loser. But to 'Zen Lunatics' like Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder, the term means something quite different. It refers to the *hobos* that first began to create a non-conventional way of life for themselves during the Great Depression. There were no jobs, so large numbers of unemployed men went on the road. Actually, they didn't travel by road but they rode the rails, like we see Ray Smith and the old hobo with his St. Teresa poem in his knapsack. The hobos passed time in hobo jungles along the train tracks; they begged for food or odd jobs in the small towns; they formed a kind of transient community. Essentially poor and alone, hobo culture was one of sharing the limited resources that were available. Their enemies were the police officers, train conductors and brakemen that represented authority.

The hobo way of life declined during World War II, when jobs became available and men went back to work. The 1950s was an age of unprecedented prosperity based in part on the institutional recognition that consumerism could fuel profits. This is the beginning of the suburbs, the solitary nuclear family, keeping up with the Joneses, and the ubiquitous television set. In this new context, hobos or travelling *strangers* were considered a threat and more ruthlessly rooted out than before by authorities. But hobos still had a shadow of romantic allure as wanderers, adventurers, and, in the eyes of Jack Kerouac, 'saints' rather than 'sinners'. Ray Smith and the little hobo represent those who choose freedom over institutionalization, eat their meals under the stars, and suffer cold and hardship, impermanent but meaningful relationships all for their independence. The image of the lonely, deserted but mentally tough hobo was

enshrined in American culture, immortalized in country song like Jimmie Rodgers “Blue Yodel No. 9” and “Hobo Bill’s Last Ride” as icons of independence.

What Buddhist and Hobo culture shared in particular was an imperative to independence or ‘non-attachment’. The common emphasis is liberation from external constraints and a focus on the simple life. Japhy Ryder and his tea, and Ray Smith with his cheap wine and tin of beans that taste so real and so good precisely because they are enjoyed rather than craved. Excessive attachment to people or things not only makes a person dependent on externalities, but transforms a person into a slave. For the Buddhist, objects ultimately are not real; even we are not really real; pleasure and pain is not real; all is just form or a mental construction. But we do live in the world; we experience it as real; we experience ourselves as real; we feel pleasure and pain as real. The point is to keep our lives simple; maximize the minimum; avoid pleasures that corrupt, and to state what in Buddhism is a paradox – *to keep things real*. The hobo and the monk are focused on what really matters.

### **Madmen and Lunatics**

The hobo and the Zen monk, or Bodhisattva, are the outriders and critics of everything that is wrong with modernity. But were it not for their dedication to independence, which can be construed as negative individuality and characteristic oddness, it would be difficult to describe them as modern. The Dharma Bums, however, were extremely modern. Titles of books can tell you a lot, but they don’t tell you everything. Another possible title for this book could have been *Zen Lunatics*, a phrase that is repeated by Kerouac many times and better conveys what was novel in the Beat culture of the 1950s.

Japhy and Ray belong to a circle that includes Morely Coughlin and Alvah Goldbook, who in turn belong to a larger group that called themselves The Beats. Japhy is the most serious Buddhist and Ray is his disciple. But the larger group tends to flirt with Buddhism, as most people do today, for practical reasons. Among this group, the most important player is Alvah Goldbook, in real life Alan Ginsberg the poet and writer of ‘Howl’. The Beats were a very important literary group of New Yorkers and West Coasters who came together in a little venue in San Francisco that Ray (alias Jack Kerouac) describes as one of the most subliminal ‘wow’ moments of his life. All the contributors did was to read poetry, some of them haiku’s, but in the process they crystallized a free-flowing experimental style that transformed literature forever. It is not that experimental literature was totally lacking before the Beats. You’ll notice, for example, that they refer in their conversations to Ezra Pound, who did away with rhyme and punctuation. But the Beats were a movement; they recognized themselves as a movement; and they buried the literature of the past.

As mentioned, many of the Beats flirted with Zen Buddhism. They liked Buddhist poetry because it broke all the rules of verse to achieve an effect. But their main creative source wasn’t

Buddhism at all. It was experimental jazz, specifically beep-bop, where the point was never to follow the notes but to play with the notes and move them in new and different directions. The governing principle was maximum freedom for the creative artist to express himself or herself, without restrictions. The Beats were forceful critics; they would laugh and boo other poets off the stage for being too rigid. As in beep-bop, every performance was supposed to be unique, and poets were always looking for new combinations that could give rise to novel insights. What was even more modern in their approach was the celebration of a 'moment' in time that would be lost never to return were it not for the cleverness of the recording industry. The jazz *affectionados* in the recording industry realized that it was not just the musical composition that was important but also the performance. Ironically, live recordings of legendary performances now became sought after and semi-permanent objects of consumption. Isn't the whole point of unique, immediate, in the moment experiments contrary to such an ethic of consumption?

Certainly the Beats thought so. They were anti-establishment and anti-consumption from the get go. Unlike the poets of the past, they did not want to be understood, or at least not to be co-opted by an emerging consumer marketplace in media that they detested. They developed their own lingo, threw convention to the wind, mixed and matched genres in what they obviously regarded as hilariously confusing to the university trained person, let alone the mainstream denizens of the consumer marketplace. As you saw in the novel, however, they themselves were university trained individuals, teaching or researching at UCLA or other West or East Coast Universities. They lived in and around the university. But they were not *of the university*; they were literary revolutionaries who challenged and transformed university culture. In the novel, you see them primarily as a gang of literary lunatics. The establishment saw them as *the enemy*. And that's how they liked it.

Nothing was sacred for the Beats. They were the first to use swear words routinely. They weren't the first to talk about sex, but certainly the first to do it so freely. They can be said to have invented free verse and free love simultaneously, as the description of *yabyum* at Japhy or Alvah's house depicts. Elite culture was parodied and mixed up with pop culture. You might say that they legitimized pop culture. Because nobody was allowed to be in charge any more, the Beats were effectively in charge. Let me put this in a clearer perspective for you. Without the Beats, no Beatnicks or Hippies. Without the Beats, no modern pop music, no Bob Dylan, no Jimi Hendrix, no Woodstock, no Lenny Bruce, no modern disrespectful stand-up comedy. No lots of things.

In *The Dharma Bums*, we get to see the Zen Lunatics or Beats inventing a new kind of modern world. We get a sense of the fun of creation. We get an understanding of the toleration of any kind of experiment on the grounds that it really might produce something new. And quite often it did generate something new. Most of us didn't know what the hell Bob Dylan was talking about in Desolation Row, but we got the impression that it was pretty damn cool. Kerouac describes the act of creation with all its warts. Personally, I find the banter between the Beats in

the novel rather frustrating, and even Ray and Japhy can't figure out what Morley is saying most of the time. But their tolerance for his verbal experiments is fascinating. Here's an example on the way to the California Matterhorn:

"You're crazy, Morley."

"I dunno, maybe I am, but if I am I'll leave a lovely will anyway." Then out of nowhere he would say "Well I'm very pleased to go climbing with two poets, I'm going to write a book myself, it'll be about Ragusa, a late medieval maritime city state republic which solved the class problem, offered the secretaryship to Machiavelli and for a generation had its language used as the diplomatic one for the Levant. This was because of pull with the Turks, of course."

"Of course," we'd say.

So he'd ask himself the question out loud: "Can you secure Christmas with an approximation only eighteen million seconds left of the original old red chimney?"

"Sure," says Japhy laughing.

"Sure," says Morley, wheeling the car around increasing curves, "they're boarding reindeer Greyhound specials for a pre-season heart-to-heart Happiness Conference deep in Sierra wilderness ten thousand five hundred and sixty yards from a primitive motel. It's newer than analysis and deceptively simple. If you lost the roundtrip ticket you can become a gnome, the outfits are cute, and there's a rumor that Actors Equity conventions sop up the overflow bounced from the Legion. Either way, of course, Smith" (turning to me in the back) "and in finding your way back to the emotional wilderness you're bound to get a present from...someone. Will some maple syrup help you to feel better?"

"Sure, Henry."

And that was Morley. (31-2)

Now, if you really think about this stream of consciousness, you can just about derive some meaning from this entire Christmas as sham psychiatry rant. But then you are probably missing the playfulness and the magic of the moment by thinking too hard. The liner notes for the early Rolling Stones albums, written by Andrew Loog Oldham, sound just like this, by the way. I remember it making the Stones seem way cooler than the Beatles.

The Zen Lunatics *talked a blue streak* which does not resemble authentic Zen, which tends to be very economical with words. But only Japhy, the real Bodhisattva in the bunch, ever seems

worried about that. As far as the Beats were concerned, Zen was just one weapon in their anti-establishment experimentation. Words, lots of them jumbled together, were ammunition.

### **Fighting the Establishment**

Unlike the meek little hobo with his St. Teresa poem, wanting to be left alone, Kerouac and the Beats were engaged in a battle with the 1950s establishment. Let's not forget that Cold War America was one very powerful establishment. Labeled even by one President [Eisenhower] as a corporate-military complex, it was not exactly tolerant of opposition. The Beats might appear to be crazy lunatics, but they were engaged in a very serious struggle, with important consequences. As the Beat generation made inroads into the universities, and popular culture, they were able to mobilize students against that corporate-military complex in ways that we still wonder at today. And they arguably changed a university culture of conformity to one of critical discussion that also continues in the present. If just barely.

The prosperity of the 1950s depended on a culture of consumption, where individuals purchased happiness in the form of secure relationships and material possessions. In fact, happiness was institutionally redefined in the 50s as the ability to buy the latest technological wonder. Things haven't changed so very much, have they? Or did they? The one thing that I remember most distinctly about university culture in the 1960s – a scant ten years later – is that excessive materialism was frowned upon. It was decidedly 'uncool' to display wealth or power over others. The culture was welcoming and inclusive. There were lots of Japhys around, who wore clothes because they were comfortable and who shopped in second hand stores. Materialism was uncool unless it was creative. I remember my female classmates looking like gypsies with clothes that they had put together from vintage stores. Apartments and dorms were decorated cheaply, but with interesting posters. Japhy tied a red bandana around his light to create the mood for *yabyum* in ways that are familiar. What I also remember is that, if you were poor like me, communal gatherings were great. The pot I smoked and the wine I drunk, I couldn't and didn't pay for in those early years. When I could afford it, I too shared. One of the seemingly trivial aspects of *The Dharma Bums* is this tendency to create temporary communities. In the sixties, this tendency went so far as to generate communes, which rarely lasted but were very interesting as experiments. The hobo or lonely wanderer is one image in the book that is counterpoised by this regular if transient coming together.

Surprisingly, the Zen ideal of community – the sanga – is never mentioned in *The Dharma Bums*. The concept of companionship here has its roots in a number of idealistic visions of America's past – the Puritans who stuck together in the face of oppression, the pioneers who helped one another out, the IWA who called fellow union brothers and sisters, and club musicians who sat in and jammed with one another, passing on the latest techniques. Japhy's heroes and buddies of old were longshoremen and loggers [not lumberjacks!]. Most of these makeshift communities – with the notable exception of jazz musicians -- were not only on the fringes of mainstream

society but also on the fringes of modernity. For a while, in the 1950s, some of these older communities were idealized in the folk music revival, in which Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan played critical roles. But modern society, with its suburban tentacles extending everywhere, rendered traditional models of community increasingly irrelevant as alternatives. Even Dean Moriarty's symbol of independence and rebellion – the car – quickly became a tool of oppression, allowing uniform and monotonous suburbs to spread further and further. It is significant to note that the West Coast centre of the anti-establishment movement during the 1950s and 1960s was San Francisco, with its established wood-framed houses and a hilly terrain that denied suburbs their basic premise – nondescript uniformity. Los Angeles, on the other hand, was a paradise destroyed (a la 'Hotel California' by the Eagles) because it was the ideal platform for suburban spread.

While the jury is still out on the anti-establishment agenda of the Zen Lunatics, one point needs to be made clear. They asked some very cogent questions about modernity and they offered recognizably modern alternatives. They were not defeatist, and some of them, including Japhy are still around. Now, any modern i.e. bureaucratic society is a powerful entity to oppose. A modern consumer society is far more difficult to move towards sanity because it recruits the individual in his or her own destruction. On the one hand, it might appear to be freedom to have material resources and choices. On the other hand, as Zen Buddhism clearly teaches, nothing could be more destructive of real freedom than material craving. We have turned into a society that has buyer's regret, but we have no idea how to stop buying. And if we ever did stop buying, our economy would collapse with a lot of pain for innocent people. But any self-respecting Buddhist would say that life is suffering, and pain should never be an excuse for enslavement. I like the way Kerouac lays out the alternatives at the end of chapter 13:

But there was a wisdom in it all, as you'll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of wheels. You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way and the Zen Lunatics have long joined dust, laughter on their dust lips. Only one thing I'll say for the people watching television, the millions and millions of the One Eye; they're not hurting anyone while they're sitting in front of that Eye. But neither was Japhy...I see him in future years stalking along with a full rucksack, in suburban streets, passing the blue television windows of homes, alone, his thoughts the only thoughts not electrified to the Master Switch. As for me, maybe the answer was in my little Buddy poem that kept on: "Who played this cruel

joke, on bloke after bloke, packing like a rat, across the desert flat...’Was it God got mad’...

A real Buddhist might have said that, in the end, ‘nothing matters’, and might even have gone deep into that ‘nothing matters’. But Kerouac could never make that leap. He was just too vulnerably human.

### **A Cold Mountain Revisited**

The first half of *The Dharma Bums* juxtaposes Han Shan’s poem about ‘Climbing Cold Mountain’ with the actual climb made by Japhy, Ray, and Morley of the Matterhorn in the Sierra mountains. We just can’t take the climb of these three stooges as seriously as Han Shan’s haiku. Morley is an obviously comic character with his air mattress; he’s more in love with his pictures of mountains at home than tackling a real mountain. Japhy is easier to take seriously, but running around towards the top of the Matterhorn in a jock strap is hardly conducive to serious reflection. Ray has his moment of satori, but he seems as interested in getting his pork chops, port and pancakes as in experiencing nature.

What can you expect from an urban Easterner in the woods? But perhaps we shouldn’t stereotype Easterners.. Because one of the greatest ever visits to the woods was made in the nineteenth-century by an Easterner, William Thoreau in that famous book *Walden*. Thoreau was among the first to introduce his readers to the Buddhist doctrines of ‘no harm’ and ‘non attachment that he felt most strongly while in Nature. Thoreau was succeeded by a host of others who, consciously or unconsciously, combined naturalism and Buddhism. Chief among these was John Muir, who is referred to warmly in *The Dharma Bums* by Japhy. (51) It is primarily to John Muir by the way that we owe the creation of national parks like Yellowstone in the United States.

Despite the comic elements, the length and the detail of the discussion of the hike up the mountain trail points to something relatively new and significant. Another possible title for *The Dharma Bums* might have been *On the Trail*. There is something liberating about grabbing a knapsack (backpack) and heading off into Nature. There’s no doubt that this will not be Ray’s last foray into a domain that this urban Easterner couldn’t comprehend prior to his friendship with Japhy. For Japhy, going into Nature is always a spiritual experience. The Nature that he prefers is the backwoods of the place where he comes from. He’s an authentic backwoodsman, who has worked as a logger and a fire watcher in British Columbia and Oregon. It isn’t only Japhy’s knowledge of Zen poetry and philosophy that makes him the hero of this novel. He’s fully at home only in the wilderness.

North America was once all wilderness, uninhabited by so-called civilized man. North America still contains pockets of wilderness and, equally important, the idea of North America is that of wilderness. In contrast to European civilization – Woolf’s deserted house and overrun garden --



the relatively wild and uninhabited Nature offers a physical and mental alternative to modern society. The option of going into Nature – real or imagined -- provides Japhy, Ray, and Morley with a resource for generating multiple meanings in the modern world. For example, the wilderness can represent the rugged independence of the pioneer. It can symbolize harmony and connection with the universe, as when one looks at the stars from a campsite. It can offer completely new esthetic values, such as the lonely wind buffeted pine on an ancient rock. It can reflect the eternal solitude of a raging river or a snow covered mountain.

It is a given that most people will not see what Nature has to offer because they are caught up either in their own desires or the demands of society. When Japhy, Ray, and Morley climbed up the Matterhorn, other hikers were few and far between. The only people who were going into the woods were hunters, who thought that Japhy and the boys were crazy:

“Well you boys goin huntin this morning?”

“No’m’, said Japhy, “just climbing Matterhorn.”

“*Matterhorn*, why I wouldn’t do that if somebody paid me a thousand dollars”  
(37)

Nature was not on their radar except as something that offered recreational excitement and resources that could be expropriated. The conventional person saw nothing to be discovered or explored.

Japhy and the boys are not so much discovering and exploring the Matterhorn as they are creating a new and recognizably modern view of Nature. Most of you share elements of that modern view of Nature as something unspoiled, awesome, restorative and *part of you* because you live in Canada, Japhy’s ideal type wilderness. People visit Canada every year just to experience a Nature that didn’t exist before people like Kerouac helped to invent it.

Let’s go up the trail with the boys to get a closer look at what is being invented. It’s irritating that they have to talk so much on a fascinating walk into Nature, but it allow us to see some of the distinct components that went into the new and modern naturalism. Japhy and Ray are Buddhists, so the first issue that they address with respect to the California Matterhorn is the fundamental unreality of things. Fundamentally, Nature does not exist:

“Here we are by a fresh pure lake walkin along in this good air, by God it’s a haiku in itself.”

“Comparisons are odious, Smith,” he saint sailing back to me, quoting Cervantes and making a Zen Buddhist observation to boot. “it don’t make a damn friggin difference whether you’re in The Place [a Frisco club] or hiking up Matterhorn, it’s all the same old void, boy”. And I mused about that and realized he was right,

comparisons *are* odious, it's all the same, but it sure felt great and suddenly I realized this (in spite of my swollen foot veins) would do me a lot of good and get me away from thinking and maybe make me appreciate perhaps a whole new way of living.

"Japhy I'm glad I met you. I'm gonna learn all about how to pack rucksacks and what to do and hide in these mountains when I'm sick of civilization. In fact I'm grateful I met you.

Nature might not exist, but being in nature *feels* good for Ray. What is it about Nature that feels good to Ray that the hunters might not understand? It is a cure for being 'sick of civilization'. Not only the civilization outside us, but the civilization inside us. It does Ray a lot of *good* to *get away from thinking*.

Hiking Matterhorn puts life in perspective for Ray. He clears his head and appreciates moments, especially drinking crystal clear and cold water from a mountain stream. He begins to notice things, like the weird shapes of rocks, the wind *dancing* through the big ones, and the play of light and shadows. Ray is identified as the master of "how to write spontaneously and all that"; in fact, that's his life work. But experiencing Nature, he can say to Japhy:

"Ah that's nothing."

Your ambitions, your cravings, your definitions of yourself, slide away when you are in nature. You become childlike again. You get out of your head, which can be a pretty messy place.

Jean-Paul Sartre, who found Nature alien and terrifying by the way, wrote that *hell is other people*. Ray's construction of Nature is not terrifying, and to the extent that it is alien, Nature doesn't care about foolish and transient human squabbles. The Matterhorn just *is*. If it symbolized anything, it is a metaphor for patience and tolerance. Ray finds himself forgiving his detractors and enemies on the trail. The higher up he goes, the more insignificant the troubles of the world down below seem to be. The higher he goes, the more human relationships are reduced to their essential elements – the joy of simple companionship. Two wandering hobos sharing a meal around a fire. That provides yet another metaphor for life. Although we are all lonely wanderers, occasionally we have moments of connection with one another. The point is that most people don't realize what they have because they don't take the time to smell the trees and look at the boulders. Boulder looking is an accepted Zen practice. It reminds us that we are alone, but there is something majestic about being a solitary rock. Too cerebral?

Hiking up a mountain is not the same as walking in the park. Traversing the wilderness takes real effort, and it's good to be in shape. Japhy is in great shape; Ray isn't. But both of them put in some real muscle power. That's part of the magic of going into the wilderness. You've got to do something if you want to get somewhere. Climbing the Matterhorn means leaving the well-

marked part of the trail and scrambling through some scree. Ever climbed through scree? It's bloody hard work. It takes it out of your leg muscles on the way up and on the way down, where you have to keep from sliding. Going off the trail almost always means having to do some dangerous dodging around cliffs and boulders that are surrounded by that shale like rock. It can be pretty tedious and pretty scary at the same time. What Ray learns by watching Japhy is that the best way to climb is to hop from rock to rock. What rock hopping looks like to Ray is *dancing*. There's no getting around the difficult of rock climbing but it's easier and more interesting if you learn to dance. Ray doesn't just learn about mountain climbing, he learns about how to deal with modern life by scrambling over ancient rocks.

One reason why Ray doesn't make it to the top – and a characteristic that casts a shadow over Jack Kerouac's life – is that he gives up. A Zen maxim for enlightenment is to keep going when you think that you can't keep going. Ray does make a vow to make it to the top next time around, however. It's not only fatigue that prevents Ray from making it to the top. It's also fear. Fear is the modern mind killer. We are afraid to change, afraid to give up our comfortable lives, afraid to take what Zen writers call the *jump* off the cliff. A much more profound and fundamental problem than clinging to a comfortable modern way of life and its possessions, however, is that we cling to the "I". Modernity has created twin idols in our minds – society and self. For the Zen practitioner, *neither* of these is real. You can reject modern society and its many meaningless values but eventually you still have to deal with yourself.

Roy achieves a moment of enlightenment on the Matterhorn watching Japhy come down from the top. If you've ever been on top of a rocky mountain, you'll recognize what it means to come down. You can *dance* your way up, but coming down is a crazy proposition if you think too much. You just have to run and to trust yourself not to fall. If you think about what you are doing too much, you'll never get down the mountain. I've experienced this many times in British Columbia where I used to hike. Sometimes, the downward angles seem so steep that you literally stay frozen just thinking about how dangerous it is to go any further. Then it starts to get dark and you realize that you have to get going, and you just start running down the mountain. It's one of the most exhilarating experiences imaginable. Time stops still. When you get to the marked trail and turn around, you can't believe how far you've come in so short a time.

This experience is familiar to all hikers with or without the Zen framework. You *forget yourself* when descending and it is an exhilarating, totally freeing experience that makes the rest of the trail home just a bit tedious. But put it in the Zen frame and you get some additional meanings. Ray realizes that he shouldn't be afraid of falling. Whose going to fall anyway? Ray? But when you are careening down a mountain, there is no Ray. There's just going down. Similarly, there was just going up when Japhy was dancing on the rocks. There is no Ray, no Japhy, only dancing up and careening down. You realize how insubstantial all these ideas of yourself are. You let go of yourself and you let yourself go.

## Finding Your Own Wilderness

Modern society is a complex and artificial creation. That we recognize. But that the self or the individual is also a complex and artificial creation is harder to recognize. Everyone at any time has an idea of the self as something permanent, even possibly eternal. But the modern self is obsessed with itself. The modern self is a much more burdensome set of attributes than it has ever been. Even when we reject society's demands, we still feel the need to discover ourselves, protect ourselves, shore up the foundation and the fabric of ourselves. Buddhism is an ancient religion developed for a traditional society. Zen Buddhism and its ideas about Nature speak to modern men and women, not because we are looking for Nirvana but because modernity definitions of self and society have moved beyond the point of healthy tension into a crisis of epic proportions. Zen suggests that, while we have to deal with *our* selves and *our* society – these are real enough for us -- we could be healthier by recognizing that these are largely artificial entities. We don't have to regard them as illusions, to recognize that they are *brickolages* or crazy constructions that often get in our way.

The practical, as distinct from the religious, message of Buddhism, for modernity is to simplify our lives. A walk in the woods or the wilderness is a reminder of what really matters. There may be many aspects of life that we cannot simplify if, for example, we live, work, teach and learn in a big city like Toronto. But we should try to keep things in perspective and not be taken in by consumer and culture junkies. Not all that is complex is necessarily *odious*. Some things that are complicated, like a book, or a symphony, or a person, can be fascinating, rewarding, satisfying. The point is to discriminate from a foundation that is clear from artificial obstructions and cravings as possible. Nobody's perfect, but some are more perfect than others. Listen to them; imitate them; but don't cling to them. Be yourself, but don't take that self too seriously. Learn to laugh at yourself.

You could do worse than get out into the wilderness occasionally. As Japhy says to Ray:

“I'm going to teach [your] prayer to the monks I meet in Japan. There's nothing wrong with you Ray, your only trouble is you never learned to get out to spots like this, you've let the world drown you in horseshit and you've been vexed...though as I say comparisons *are* odious, but what we're sayin now is true.”

Good advice, with one qualification. Get out to spots in our Canadian wilderness, not Han Shan or Japhy Ryder's wilderness. Start from where you live, not where somebody else lives. Invent your own wilderness; don't rely on other people's wildernesses. The Group of Seven did that and created a new art form in the process. Most people hated their paintings at the time because they were too preoccupied with looking at European paintings with European meanings – like

the paintings of Lily Briscoe. Learn from Lily Briscoe's paintings, but generate your own meanings. Don't be terrified of other people's judgments.

## **The Dharma Bums: Lecture Two**

### **Misogyny**

Before going into *The Dharma Bums* more deeply, it is incumbent upon me to address an issue that recurs in the novel. Kerouac's attitude towards women is troubling. In the first place, the novel is extremely male like a 'buddy movie'. Women are largely missing from the scene as they have been for most of *history*. When they do appear, they play bit parts and are defined overwhelmingly in terms of the needs of the male characters. Thus, Princess, Christine and Psyche are either sex objects or support structures. They are treated very shabbily: Princess is farmed out to all Japhy's friends; Christine is barefoot and pregnant in the cabin; and, after giving Japhy what he wants, Psyche is literally thrown off the ship going to Japan. For the most part, Kerouac offers us a fascinating model of a new kind of hero in Japhy – the Zen hobo – but the depictions of Japhy as a chick magnet are gratuitous and adolescent.

Misogyny is defined as hatred of women, but it would be more accurate to say that misogyny is fear of women bordering occasionally on hatred. Kerouac evidences that attitude in spades. It was a not uncommon attitude in the 1950s. But that does not make it any more excusable. Here is an author desperately trying to contribute to a more compassionate and liberated modern consciousness but one that denies women any independent identity. Even in the case of his friend Rosie, who suffers mentally and commits suicide, what we are left with is a *shudder* rather than compassionate understanding. Like so many male writers, Kerouac feels sorry for the world of sentient beings but doesn't waste a lot of sympathy on women.

To this it might be countered that *The Dharma Bums* is largely autobiographical. It's a story about Ray Smith and his buddies. That's the focus; so why should we expect Kerouac to spend much time on women? Moreover, it's not that Ray and Japhy dislike women so much as they are bachelors more concerned with sowing their wild oats and attempting to make their mark in the literary world. They might be more understanding if and when they married and settled down. Why ruin a good buddy novel, with some serious and timely messages, by importing an irrelevant feminist critique? Does feminism have to apply everywhere? I'd be more sympathetic were it not for the fact that Kerouac, a la Ray Smith, also demonstrates some disturbing attitudes towards women. He associates women with sex and sex with death – the cycle of rebirth – which is akin to suggesting that women give birth to all the sadness in life. He intermittently commits himself to celibacy to avoid contagion from women. And, not surprisingly, he notes that women tend to be afraid of him. With good reason.

We can speculate *ad nauseam* on the reasons for Kerouac's attitude towards women. He was raised a Catholic, so maybe the story of Eve and the Serpent stuck in his consciousness. He was brought up by a strong willed mother, which tends to encourage men to divide women into sluts and Madonnas – mostly the former. His biggest life fear was a binding emotional attachment, which made it easier for him to connect with men than women. Etc, etc. But none of these autobiographical characteristics can exempt

Kerouac from the serious charge of misogyny. His buddies Japhy Ryder and Sean Monahan may be far from perfect, but they seem healthier emotionally than Ray Smith alias Jack Kerouac.

### **If God is Dead**

*The Dharma Bums* would be a better book if women were treated more humanely. But it's still a great book and one that addresses the important question of the course – what do you do when God is dead? In fact, Kerouac puts the issue much more clearly than simply saying that God has disappeared from the human universe. Ray Smith was raised a Catholic and still has affection for Jesus; ostensibly, he's just added Buddhism to his Christianity. One of the big attractions of Buddhism is that it is non-dogmatic and highly tolerant of other religious persuasions.

But religion has changed fundamentally for our modern age. It is no longer a given that you can embrace in child-like innocence. It is a choice that you make at the edge of an abyss of nothingness. Christ and Buddha are *choices* for Ray Smith, just as Saint Teresa is a choice for the lonesome hobo at the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*. The *belief* in God or religion has lost all of its external authority and resides only in internal conviction. "After all," Ray Smith thinks, "Augustine was a spade and Francis my idiot brother". (102) In other words, the rites and rituals of Roman Catholicism -- "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" -- no longer have a strong hold upon him, and the ecclesiastical Christmas has been usurped by "presents under the tree".

The modern age has deconstructed religious belief and left us in a lonely world of *Impersonal matter*. On Desolation Peak, Ray Smith echoes the modern wish that "there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter". (181) There is no meaning for human life apart from the meanings that we create for ourselves. While human freedom can occasionally be joyous, it's also tragic:

It's such a haunted and pitiful thing to have to live...Are we fallen angels who didn't want to believe that nothing *is* nothing and so were born to lose our loved ones and dear friends one by one and finally our own life to see it proved. (183)

The ultimate answer to the meaning of life is *nothing*. "the little flowers grew everywhere around the rocks, [on Desolation Peak] and no one had asked them to grow, or me to grow". (180) Nietzsche once said that *if you look into the abyss long enough, it looks back at you*. The Buddhism of *The Dharma Bums* is a way of translating this abyss, this nothing, this void into a positive. If the world of matter was real, it would only be a very, very sad place. The fact that it is all an illusion, a dream, makes it more bearable. More on the *abyss* later.

### **The Rucksack (Backpack) Revolution**

If life is an illusion, certain kinds of living are more illusory than others. The craving for possessions, including the possession of others, is big time *samsara*. Samsara is a great word; in Sanskrit, it means *passing through*. Doesn't matter if you are a Buddhist or not, the point is that we are all just passing through life. So how best to live?

It's not the having of *things* that gets in the way of living; it's the desiring of them. A major difficulty of modern life is that we have too many things; we become attached to those things; and consumer society operates on the principle that even more things will make us happier. Life has enough sadness as it is, but craving things makes life much sadder than it has to be by rendering simple pleasures unsatisfactory. Craving things is not a new idea. People have always desired goods, power, the approval or love of others. The one distinct advantage of traditional or religious societies was the affirmation of alternate and opposed principles – like ethics, humanity, compassion, wisdom, community, caring – that modern society devalues because they are too difficult to measure. Many traditional religions *privileged* giving up a lot of those things in order to concentrate upon what is really important. The monk, the hermit, the aesthetic were not just saintly or superior people; they were reminders to keep your eye on what's significant.

If you put together the modern hobo and the traditional wandering monk and you get the backpacker. What makes the backpacker quintessentially modern, however, is his/her obsession with freedom. You can't be autonomous if you are caught up in the rat trap that is modern society. It is only when the backpacker is on the trail that he gets rid of the stink of the modern city – in this case symbolized by LA. Off the highway, on the trail, the backpacker can finally "sleep free". (93) When he's not ridding the rails, Ray usually thumbs a lift from people who he diagnoses or who self-diagnose as *unfree*. The big rig trucker Beaudry comments:

Here I am drivin this rig back and forth from Ohio to L.A. and make more money than you ever had in your whole life as a hobo, but you're the one who enjoys life and not only that but you do it without workin or a whole lot of money. Now, who's smart, you or me?" And he had a nice home in Ohio with wife, daughter, Christmas tree, two cars, garage, lawn, lawnmower, but he couldn't enjoy any of it because he really wasn't free. It was sadly true. (93)

The backpacker, on the other hand, experiences moments of "exhilaration" and "amazing revelation" because he has "everything I needed right on my back". (117) A price must be paid for this freedom. Sometimes Ray sleeps the sleep of innocence; but other times he cries himself to sleep.

There are different kinds of backpackers. Ray gets on the road or the trail and lets them take him somewhere or anywhere. He's a modern wanderer in search of experiences with some characteristics of the *tourist*. He rejects commitment, but he genuinely likes people. He finds it extremely difficult to live for several months on Desolation Peak, even though he doesn't say so in this book. Whereas Ray is a relatively passive collector of experiences, Japhy is much more active and purposeful:

Japhy said "Why do you sit on your ass all day?"

"I practice do-nothing".

"What's the difference? Burn it, my Buddhism is activity," said Japhy rushing off down the hill again. Then I could hear him sawing wood and whistling in the distance. He



couldn't stop jiggling for a minute....But I just ambled and dreamed around. We were two strange dissimilar monks on the same path.

The great characteristic of backpacking is that it can accommodate completely different personalities while keeping the focus on what really counts in life. Both Japhy and Ray come to appreciate the huge difference between what a person really needs – such as food and fresh air – and what most people want. What many people learn from life is that what they wanted wasn't what they really needed (or even really wanted).

The average modern person chases happiness, but is hardly ever really happy. The backpacker experiences moments of real loneliness but genuine joy. Unlike most modern people, the backpacker is not anesthetized by the demands of society and civilization, and so is able to respond authentically to the moment. It may be coming a bit clearer that the backpacker is partly an activity and partly a metaphor. There are lots of recreational backpackers, but not as many genuine *rucksack revolutionaries*. What Japhy and Ray are advocating is a revolution in one's perception of life's deeper meaning. In this sense you can have a picture of a mountain on your wall and still be part of the *knapsack revolution*.

In 1958, when *The Dharma Bums* was published, people with actual or metaphorical backpacks were few and far between. Kerouac was not merely anticipating a movement, but helping to create a movement. By the 1960s, lots of young people were on the road, thumbing their way to freedom. It was a North American revolution that took rather longer to take off in Europe. Ironically, Europe was the place to which many North American high school graduates and, especially, university students would travel first. Rather more slowly Japhy's ideal of tramping in your own woods rather than experiencing:

"all such European gloom and crap, I want my Dharma Bums to have springtime in their hearts when the blooms are girling and the birds are dropping little fresh turds surprising cats who wanted to eat them a moment ago." (155)

But Japhy's vision of what a futuristic backpacker cum revolutionary might look like did come to pass. This is a kind of person that we all recognize in 2013:

"I'll do a new long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains Without End' ...like one of them real long Chinese silk paintings that show two little men hiking in an endless landscape of gnarled old trees and mountains so high they merge with the fog in the upper silk void. I'll spend three thousand years writing it, **it'll be packed full of information on soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan Tsung's travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains.**

If you doubt the power of the *knapsack revolution*, just take a walk over to York's Faculty of Environmental Studies.

## The Party

You can't always be backpacking, actually or metaphorically. Most of our lives are spent off the trail. The truth is that one of the things we *need* as opposed to *want* is connection with other people. Ray Smith keeps saying how he feels compassion for other people, but the truth is that he needs other people, even if he stays on the fringe and plays the role of the watcher and, occasionally, the scary stranger. We see how this need plays out in his touching, albeit sometimes patronizing, descriptions of the people that he shares rides with. More profoundly, he *needs* people like Japhy, who open him up to lifestyle choices that this intellectual New Yorker might never have considered. Few of us are so independent that we can walk life's trail alone.

In modern life, traditional communities are defunct. They tend to be traps that limit our creative freedom. Hence the need to create new communities, however transient. The communities that you create in your youth, and at places like colleges and universities, will be some of the most significant connections in your life, even though they likely will not last all that long. I still remember my friends from university, when we were more idealistic, and actually cared about each other. *The Dharma Bums* presents a modern model of community for you to consider, symbolized by **the party**. The model may seem a bit dated now, but that's not the point. We need to create communities that are meaningful to us, not the late 1950s.

Japhy's goodbye party isn't our party. But there's a lot we can learn from it. First, parties are no longer regular or ritualized. Every modern party needs a leader, an initiator. Japhy is the connecting link for everyone. If Japhy decides to walk the trail rather than be at the party, there's going to be no party. Once Japhy and Ray cut out to walk the trails, the party's over. But while he's there, Japhy takes responsibility for the party. Second, the key to a good modern party is that everybody is invited:

That night the wine flowed down the hill like a river. Sean had put together a lot of big logs for an immense bonfire in the yard. It was a clear starry night, warm and pleasant, in May. Everybody came.

Third, you mustn't over regulate a modern party. You have to allow the party to happen spontaneously. What that means is that different groupings will form:

The party soon became clearly divided into three parts again. I spent most of my time in the living room where we had Cal Tjader records on the hi-fi...Out in the yard was a quieter scene, with the glow of the fire and lots of people sitting on the long logs Sean had placed around the fire, and on the board a spread fit for a king...Up the hill meanwhile, where the stars nodded on trees, occasional couples were sneaking up to neck or just brought jugs of wine and guitars up and had separate little parties in our shack. **It was a great night.** (146-148)

But what allowed it to be a great night? That's the appropriate question. The answer is *intensity* and *tolerance*.

On the face of it, lots of things went wrong. Looked at from a conventional perspective: Japhy's father makes a spectacle of himself; Alvah and George take their clothes off; Japhy chases squealing girls around the room. A bourgeois utilitarian property owner would not approve of such a *weird* party:

Nevertheless it was strangely not out of place to see the bonfire, the food on the board, hear the guitar players, see the dense trees swaying in the breeze and a few naked men in the party.

The fourth ingredient of a great modern party is *intensity*. Alcohol certainly helps, but it was the "crazy coloured guy" bongo player who brought an unanticipated intensity to the party. Kerouac calls him a Bodhisattva or enlightened being who returns to earth out of compassion for others. But there were other intensity-producing Bodhisattvas as well, like Al Lark, a blues and flamingo guitar player. The fifth, final, and most important requirement for a great modern party is tolerance of difference. You couldn't have more eccentric people with different personalities than at Japhy's party. All that most of them have in common is friendship with Japhy. But they accept each other and thrive on the differences. The patron saint of modern tolerance is Japhy's father:

But I liked Japhy's father, the way he danced sweating and mad, the way he didn't mind any of the eccentric sights he saw, the way he let everybody do what they wanted anyway and went home around midnight in a shower of thrown flowers dancing off down to his car parked in the road. (150)

No modern party is ever going to be perfect; it worked out worst for Japhy, who had a fight with Psyche and didn't get laid at his goodbye party; but there was a presumably hungover Japhy at 8 a.m. the next morning "he got up and banged on his frying pan and chanted the "Goccham" chant and called everybody to pancakes. Back to rule number one – somebody has to take responsibility for the party. Kerouac's terse comment "Poor Japhy" says it all.

What's the point of a party? There's no point really. The saddest metaphor for the party is Alvah (Ginsburg) "in his long underwear...howling long poems in the grass". And asks Ray Smith: "Ah, for what?" Ultimately, sadness is the human condition; silence is the universe's reply. None of this negates the fact, however, that still "it was a great party".

### **Buddha Consciousness**

One truly modern characteristic of Zen Buddhism is that it encourages us to live in the moment, without clinging to moments. If you are going to party, party with earnestness. It's not just about *you*; nothing is really about *you*; the sooner you let go of yourself the better. A party is a great place to let go of yourself in a positive way, by focusing on the connection with and happiness of others. Actually, happiness is entirely the wrong word. A good Buddhist at a modern party, would do his or her darndest to welcome others and share their *joy*. It's not a question of happiness, but living the moment with them.

Living in the now is a Zen strategy for getting away from the tyranny of the past and the future. But it is also a very modern approach, since modern lives have no real shape other than moments of significance. Some modern writers, like Proust, seek to cling to moments by making them as aesthetically memorable as possible. A Zen Buddhist would be more inclined to embrace the moment, and then let it pass. By clinging to those special moments in one's life, one sets up an abstraction that can only prevent you from fully experiencing new moments. The *moment* you begin discriminating between moments, the moment you grasp too hard, you lose.

Living in the moment, rather than the past or future, has become such an axiom of modern psychological health that it might seem entirely unnecessary to dwell on it. Nonetheless, in 1958, when most everyone was obsessed with either the past and the future, the Zen message of *The Dharma Bums* was something quite therapeutic. The therapeutic technique for embracing the moment, of course, was meditation, which Ray Smith does near his mother's home in North Carolina. What the no-thinking of meditation achieves is described brilliantly:

What did I care about the squawk of the little very self which wanders everywhere? I was dealing in outblownness, cut-off-ness, snapped, blownoutness, putoutness, turned-off-ness, nothing-happens-ness, gone-ness, gone-out-ness, the snapped link, nir, link, vana, snap! "The dust of my thoughts collected into a clove," I thought, "in this ageless solitude," I thought, and really smiled, because I was seeing the white light everywhere everything at last.

You don't have to see a white light to recognize that cutting off thoughts, which are mostly obsessive about the past or the future, you really get a sense of release.

The experience of really meditating at least once can be powerful, if it doesn't make you pee your pants. Greater experience with meditation allows you to cut off interfering thoughts routinely and to appreciate the moment. The Buddhist imperative is to focus on what you are doing *right now*. If you are sharpening your axe or chopping wood, focus on the sharpening and the chopping. If you are eating food, enjoy the food rather than obsess about it. If you are drinking tea, really drink the tea. These simple human activities can be really special if you live in the moment. A Zen master that I know told me that the best definition of Zen Buddhism was to *eat when you are hungry and sleep when you are tired*. Then, out of real compassion to my puzzled expression, he added: *Don't eat when you are not hungry and don't sleep when you are not tired*. Apart from breathing, eating and sleeping are the most important things we do. *The Dharma Bums* could be titled *Eating on the Trail*, there is that much discussion of food in the book. And it's not just because hikers get hungry. What you learn when you are hiking is that simple food and water are great when you are hungry and ready to pay attention. It's an important lesson for North Americans who spend what would be a fortune in other countries on food that is junk:

I bought my supplies for the road: a salami, Cheddar cheese wedge, Ry-Krisp and also some dates for dessert, all put away neatly in my foodwrappers. I still had peanuts and

raisins left over from our last hike together. Japhy had said, "I won't be needing those peanuts and raisings on that freighter." I recalled with a twinge of sadness how Japhy was always so dead serious about food instead of silly rockets and machines and explosives using everybody's food money to blow their heads off anyway." (165)

The point is *when you eat, really eat* and when you do anything really do it. Don't do anything half-hearted. That's Zen consciousness.

Of course, you can't just do anything and claim Zen consciousness. You can't make bombs with Zen consciousness; you can't screw people out of their savings with Zen consciousness; you can't plagiarize an essay with Zen consciousness. Zen reminds you that you are free, that you have choices, and that the choices you make will have serious consequences for your quality of life. If you make choices based on money or power – then money or power will own you rather than the other way around. Japhy and Ray define success very differently from conventional estimations. Whose party do you want to go to?

### **Saints and Fallen Angels**

One of the characteristics that made life special in the past was a belief in the existence of heroes. Heroes were larger than life figures willing to sacrifice themselves for others. The Modern Age seems hell bent upon teaching us that *everyone is in it for themselves*. To the extent that we have modern heroes, they are celluloid or celebrity heroes. The modern media doesn't seem to know whether it wants to build them up or tear them down. We seem to need Brangelina to give our lives some glamour, but we're almost as happy to show that they've got faults just like us. The biggest sin that the *glitterati* can make is to act as though they're better than us.

It's hard to find non-plastic heroes in modern life. In lots of music, and in the kind of literature produced by the Beat generation, the saints are 'fallen angels', wounded but defiant, or 'anti-heroes' who oppose mainstream values. What makes them crucially important, despite their imperfections, is that they offer an alternate perspective. Modern realistic writing makes it difficult to create heroes – we now call them protagonists -- because the modern reader can't take characters seriously unless they are in some way flawed. We find it hard to *believe* in heroes any more. "No more heroes anymore" is a totally modern song by the Stranglers. David Bowie suggests that we can still be "Heroes" but "just for one day".

Japhy Ryder clearly fails as a modern literary *character* because he's not sufficiently flawed. Kerouac is so eager to offer us a modern saint that he forgets the sinner that is in each of us. He never explores his friend Gary Ryder's psyche, so there is no divided self to add the necessary element of realism. The only serious attempt at complex characterization is the initial reunion with Ray Smith, who is shocked to find that his idol is reconsidering his lifestyle:

"Aw maybe I'm getting tired of all that. After I come back from the monastery in Japan I'll probably have my fill of it anyhow. Maybe I'll be rich and work and make a lot of money and live in a big house."

But this recanting of his Zen lunatic lifestyle is only momentary. “A minute later”, the iconic Japhy emerges saying “who wants to enslave himself to a lot of all that”. Who knows whether the real Gary Snyder ever said something like that, but the literary scenario is completely unbelievable. It is the spitting image of the Christian saint [and Kerouac was a Catholic don’t forget] being tempted by the Devil. The overcoming of this temptation simply confirms that Japhy is a Buddhist saint after all.

Ray Smith, on the other hand, is a more believable character. We know, for example, that he has a serious drinking problem; even Japhy had a fight with him about that. His attempts to convert everyone he meets to Buddhism come across as a tad shallow; his insecurities with his Mother and in-laws are not glossed over; and even his compassion for others suggests that he is crying out for sympathy himself. On the whole, he comes across as a much more passive and whiny person than Japhy Ryder. It’s not just Ray Smith either; more marginal characters such as Morley and Alvah also are more believable than Japhy Ryder. Japhy may be a recognizably modern type of individual, but we never get to know him as a unique individual. He’s larger than life.

Kerouac is too smart a writer not to realize that the Japhy he’s writing about is as much the Japhy of his imagination as his real friend Gary Snyder. In fact, after eating the best meal of life from Japhy, Ray has a dream of the emergence of a “ragged hobo” from the mountains:

A little seamed brown unimaginable Chinese hobo, had come down and was just standing at the end of the market, surveying it with an expressionless humor. He was short, wiry, his face leathered hard and dark red by the sun of the dessert and the mountains; his clothes were nothing but gathered rags...(a face like Dostoevsky’s death mask, with prominent eye brow bones and square head); and he was short and compact like Japhy. (159)

Japhy is not just Gary Snyder. He embodies all those who, like the ancient Zen monks or Dostoyevsky, expose the fundamental hollowness of modernity. He embodies one additional characteristic as well – a new world optimism that is badly needed in an increasingly pessimistic world:

Japhy was full of great ideas like that. What hope, what human energy, what truly American optimism was packed in that neat little frame of his.

All of that coiled energy is encapsulated in Japhy’s expression “Yodelayhee hoo!”

What’s not believable as a literary character can still serve as a literary symbol. Japhy symbolizes, not only a new direction – a way out of modernity’s aimlessness – but also a youthful energy that was completely lacking in the *gloom and crap* that was the old world [Europe]. Compare the world weary tone of Virginia Woolf with the pulsating energy that is *The Dharma Bums* and you’ll get a sense of renewed energy. Japhy represents that energy, in a more mature and focused form than Kerouac’s earlier hero [Dean Moriarty] to be sure, but it’s the energy, the message and the mission that counts more than the characterization. The real Gary Snyder is usurped by the “realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams”. (186)

## The Really Big Empty

For me, the most fascinating part of *The Dharma Bums* is the last few pages. It's also the least believable. Everything we've learned about Ray Smith tells us that he's not really cut out for the solitude that is Desolation Peak. It's not just that he's a New Yorker from the big city, but Ray needs to be among people, if only intermittently. An evening in his Mother's back yard is one thing, but months alone at the top of a mountain is another. Even at his Mom's place, he needed the company of dogs to be in his comfort zone.

As in the case of Japhy Ryder, however, what makes a narrative less believable can end up making it more interesting. In the first half of the book, we learned about hiking the trail and developing a new perspective on Nature. The well-worn trail, represents nature that is still on a recognizably human scale. In the novel's last few pages, Nature takes on an awesome, frightening and sublime non-persona. Non-persona because this Nature totally transcends the human realm. Ray's first experience of the Pacific Northwest takes him completely by surprise. The scale of the landscape boggles the mind:

And suddenly I saw that the Northwest was a great deal more than the little vision I had of it of Japhy in my mind. It was miles and miles of unbelievable mountains grooking on all horizons in the wild broken clouds (168)

On the trail, Ray was only afraid of the potential for falling. Now "the bigger the mountains got", Ray really begins to realize what fear is. Even when the fog rolled in and he couldn't see the mountains anymore, he began "to feel them more". (170)

The word that most accurately describes Ray's feeling towards the real Wilderness is *the sublime*. Writers in the eighteenth-century discovered the power of feeling nature's sublimity, but like Edmund Burke they tended to reject the sublime because of its anti-social potential. If the individual became swept up in such feelings, they might completely lose connection with other people. During the nineteenth-century, romantic writers mined the power of the sublime, but they still linked it to the wild and passionate side of *us*. But the new sublime that Ray perceives in the Pacific Northwest, Desolation Peak and, especially, Mount Hozomeen is completely *empty* of anything human:

It was a river wonderland, the emptiness of the golden eternity, odors of moss and bark and twigs and mud, all ululating mysterious visionstuff before my eyes, tranquil and everlasting nevertheless, the hellhairy tress, the dancing sunlight.(172)

This is Nature's equivalent of the Buddhist abyss, the void, the eternal emptiness that strikes the uninitiated with terror. And terror is exactly what Ray experiences on his first night on Desolation Peak, when the previously invisible (because of fog) Mount Hozomeen shows up in his window:

In the middle of the night while half asleep I had apparently opened my eyes a bit, and then suddenly I woke up **with my hair standing on end**, I had just seen a huge black monster standing in my window, and I looked, and it had a star over it, and it was

Mount Hozomeen miles away by Canada leaning over my backyard and staring in my window...the most mournful mountain I ever seen, and the most beautiful as soon as I got to know it and saw the Northern Lights behind it reflecting all the ice of the North Pole from the other side of the world. (178-9)

Not a user-friendly wilderness by any definition.

The breathtaking perspectives from Desolation Peak, and the Northwest Pacific mountain range, provide a symbol for the smallness and irrelevance of self. They point to something bigger than ourselves, but nothing that we can ever hope to appropriate. They are mysterious, uncanny, menacing and completely unknowable. These *real* mountains are something to be experienced rather than understood. They completely blow away Han Shan's puny Japanese mountains. In this kind of Wilderness with a capital 'W', at last one recaptures the awe and wonder that formerly mirrored the belief in God and infinity. But price you pay for the experience is the loss of the self, of what is personal.

### **The Disenchantment of the West**

We've come on a long journey from the streets of San Francisco to the Mountains of the Pacific Northwest. It was a spiritual journey, a search for meaningfulness in a meaningless world. It involved a creative meeting of East and West – Zen Buddhism and literary experimentation cross fertilizing each other in ways that helped to transform modern consciousness. From Kerouac and the Beats we got a highly charged and interventionist approach to modern life – it might sometimes seem like howling in the wilderness but the Beats were determined to squeeze the joy from life and re-invent the individual and the community as a vital 'experiment' in progress. They viewed themselves as new and distinct from the 'gloom and doom' atmosphere of Europe. The success or failure of their experiments didn't matter as much as grabbing life by the balls. So what if they were 'lunatics'? The real lunatics were the people in charge of modern society.

Japhy is a symbol of the vital energy and perpetual optimism that characterized 'beat' culture. More so than other 'beatniks', who all dabbled with Zen Buddhism as a perspective and lifestyle that supported being different and making a difference, his Buddhism was a serious commitment. But whether they dabbled or dwelled in Buddhism, what that 'religion without a God' provided them with, was the ability to seize the moment without requiring any final answer to the 'why' of existence. Ultimately everything was empty, but that only meant that: 1) you create your own reality; 2) don't worry too much; 3) experience life without guilt. The fact that Buddhists have always had an interest in Nature as something that 1) does not conform to or care about social conventions; 2) helps put life in perspective; and 3) suggests the awesomeness, purity, and power of the abyss also contributed to new attitudes towards Nature. Engagement with Nature teaches a person the difference between what is more natural in life and what is artificial. Ultimately, the abstract point may be *not to discriminate at all*; there is no difference between the suburb and the Sahara. In everyday life and relations with others, however, we do need to discriminate and the practical imperative is to *keep it simple* and *do no harm* to any living thing. That injunction would make us all environmentalists.



The new attitude towards Nature and towards what is *natural* in life eventually did lead to a *rucksack revolution*. We take hiking, backpacking and eco-tourism for granted now, but it was by no means a common perspective in 1958, when *The Dharma Bums* was published. Even the inhabitants of the so-called wilderness either took it for granted or regarded it as a resource. The Zen lunatics were labeled crazy at a time when Nature was the preserve of hunters or, at most, a nice place for a picnic. The natural environment was a *possession* for exploitation or recreation. It had no integrity of its own. The *rucksack revolution* changed all that forever. Currently a battle rages between those who view Nature as something that provides jobs and Nature as *something else altogether*. What side are you on?

The attitudes that the Zen lunatics set out to challenge were the rational-utilitarian values that we saw first emerging in the Enlightenment. What most enlightened writers could never foresee – so it is pointless blaming them – is that logical calculation would become the pseudo religion of a self-centred marketplace in desire. That marketplace debased the natural and the human that Enlightened writers cherished. We, not them, are to blame for the artificial, greedy, and alienated society that we live in. But consumer capitalism is difficult to transform within the increasingly rationalistic and realistic perspective that came to dominate our consciousness. Zen Buddhism provided an antidote by suggesting that 1) the world is not real; 2) rationalism is not reasonable; and 3) greed is the cause of much of our unhappiness. Zen also alerts us to the fact that *happiness* should not be an abstract goal; we can live life much more fully by simultaneously recognizing life's inherent sadness while still being open to 'moments of joy'.

The Buddhism of *The Dharma Bums* is not always deep or consistent. There's a lot of picking and choosing here: reincarnation is marginalized; the 4 noble truths are only touched upon; compassion is poorly defined, even sentimentalized. One aspect of Buddhist traditional culture is briefly mentioned that you might have found puzzling, however. It's not an important theme in the book, but it is an important theme in the story of Western consciousness – *magic*. When Ray Smith is at his mother's house in North Carolina – a house that Kerouac's writing paid for, by the way – he experiences something called 'Samapatti' while meditating. Samapatti means a vision. Ray describes it as follows:

I saw an ancient vision of Dipankara Buddha who was the Buddha who never said anything. Dipankara as a vast snowy Pyramid Buddha with bushy wild eyebrows...and a terrible stare...the whole vision making my hair rise. I remember the strange magic final cry that it invoked in me, whatever it means: *Colyalcolor*. It, the vision, was devoid of any sensation of I being myself. It was pure egolessness...(111)

This magical *happening* – a word the Beats invented -- isn't confined to an abstract transcendental experience. The next day, Ray goes into a trance on *colyacolor* out of concern for his mother, who had a bad cough that seemed dangerous to him. While in this hypnotic state, he gets quite explicit instructions on how to cure his mother, namely applying Heet rubbing lotion and getting rid of the flowers to which his mother turned out to be allergic.

Ray says that this was his “first and last miracle”. Zen Buddhists generally believe that magical powers will come from deep meditation, but these are relatively unimportant when compared to Enlightenment. The point is not to get too ‘interested’ in magic and miracles because it is a distraction. Nevertheless, Buddhism allows room for the magical. One of the hugely dissatisfying characteristics of modernity is that over-rational thinking sucks the magical and the miraculous out of our lives. Our lives become disenchanted and colourless, as opposed to the *colyacolour* that Ray discovers when mediating. The sociologist of modernity, Max Weber, pointed out something profoundly disturbing about the rationalistic and bureaucratic world that we have been constructing ever since the Enlightenment. On the one hand, we have more control over our environment than ever before, we have more rights, and we have a higher standard of living. On the other hand, we are *disenchanted* because we have lost our feel for magic, miracle, and genuine spirituality. Life without these characteristics, says Max Weber, is shallow and unsatisfying. If he lived today, he might say that modern enchantment is relegated to children and the crass consumer fantasy that is Disneyland.

Max Weber thought that there was no turning back. Modernity is what it is. That’s the reality we have to live with. The Zen lunatics begged to differ. There is no *reality*. We create, each of us, our own reality that we can share with others in the form of writing, poetry, and art generally. And there is no reason that these things cannot be translated into changes in our fundamentally unreal world if only we are imaginative and persistent enough. We should attempt to make our mark on the world, in co-operation with others, and by looking for inspiration wherever we find it. Modernity is just one vision of humanities future with its good points and its bad points. It is not some monolith that we must submit too. We don’t need to subscribe to the blackmail of Modernity. Even if we are just pissing in the wind, as Max Weber believes, then pissing in the wind is the very least we should be doing.

## *To the Lighthouse: Lecture One*

### Modern Relationships

#### Introduction

‘Something tells me we are not in Nietzsche land any more, Toto’. The pace has changed. Everything has slowed down to a crawl. The most intimate features of domestic life are illuminated but fleetingly by strobes of light, but coming from where? What can all this painstaking poetic description mean? How is it modern? What is this novel about the *trivial* trying to tell us and why should we care? Isn’t modernity about all about action, progress and change? Shouldn’t something, anything, be happening?

Let me begin to answer those questions by telling you a personal story. When I was 32 – about ten years ago – I went to teach in a pulp mill town called Port Alberni. I had a new job, was stable for the first time in my life, and my wife was very pregnant with our daughter. We decided to have everyone – in laws and siblings – over for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, I had to work and pick up stuff for the Christmas meal on my way home. Folks had been arriving over the course of a couple of days. There were a lot of people there at 5:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve. Most were pretty looped. I’d be hard pressed to remember the evening’s details. The only real *event* that occurred that evening was that the stove decided to die with the turkey in it. Because we were looped, we didn’t notice this right away. So it was already getting pretty late when we bundled the half cooked turkey over to the neighbour’s stove. Eventually a fully cooked turkey re-appeared along with the neighbours who joined our festivities. That’s all that happened.

Well, not exactly, because something else happened that evening. Everyone had a good time, even my mother in law, who I did not consider capable of having a good time unless it was at my expense. I have no compelling idea of how this miracle happened – it might have been a combination of Christmas season, the alcohol, the good will towards a couple who were about to start a family, and, oddly enough the turkey that came late and allowed time for a communal feeling to develop – but it was a very special ‘moment’ that everyone present recognized as a joyful experience. In fact, people talked about it for years, although they couldn’t put their finger on what they were talking about because it consisted of a *mood* or feelings of connection.

There is something about modern life that makes it tricky to ‘repeat’ these kinds of special moments. More traditional families might have greater success. But for several years, we vainly attempted to ‘repeat’ that Christmas dinner. Most of the principals duly came, but we couldn’t recapture the moment. People continued to talk about that Christmas dinner for several years, until it became a bit pathetic. For some, including my mother-in-law, it was remembered as one of the highlights of her life. She put up with me for several Christmases. What was that all about? I thought about it for years. But I never understood its significance until I read Virginia Woolf.

In the first few pages of *To the Lighthouse*, we are introduced to the likable but solitary William Bankes. He's at the summer home of the Ramsey's because he used to be Mr. Ramsey's best friend. He's a guy that stays in touch out of a sense of consideration for others despite being temperamentally aloof. For example, he's still friends with Carrie Manning who used to be close to the central figure of Book I of *To the Lighthouse* – Mrs. Ramsay. When we meet him walking with Lily Briscoe, he's thinking about the last time he had a meaningful moment with Mr. Ramsay when they were tramping together in Westmorland. Now he and Mr. Ramsay are no longer close. Bankes isn't quite sure why; Mr. Ramsay got married, had 8 kids, and a busy academic career; but who ever really knows why people are no longer friends. Bankes symbolizes his old friendship as a corpse buried in a Westmorland peat bog, faithfully preserved, as it were, in memory. When they meet these days, there is nothing new or vital in the relationship, only a tendency to *repeat* for old time's sake. But – and this is one of the novel's main messages – you can never, ever *repeat*.

Whether it's a Christmas dinner, a friendship, your childhood, or a period in history, you can't *repeat*. What you can do, however, is try to capture the moments or relationships that are personally meaningful. Book I of *To the Lighthouse* tries to do exactly that by painting a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. The characters Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, as well as their friends and acquaintances, are loosely based upon Virginia Woolf's parents. The introduction to the novel and the footnotes will all help you track the references and resemblances. But that's a distraction because an important theme of the novel is that people are incredibly complex and that *nobody can ever really know anybody else* even one's own parents. Lily Briscoe, who tries valiantly to paint a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, can't ever really pin down the person; she searches instead for what it is that someone like Mrs. Ramsay represents as a married woman with children living in a particular time that can never be *repeated*. What can perhaps be captured, by the artist's loving hand, is something of the spirit of a certain kind of person and a certain age. And, even when specific persons and times have passed, we might be able to learn something – “one particular thing that matters” -- more timeless about human relationships. The artist might be able to show us something that even the participants in life's drama only glimpsed *through a glass darkly*. If that artist is a woman, that *something* could be different and unique.

## **Windows and Doors**

The first book of *To the Lighthouse* is entitled ‘The Window’. You have to pay attention to titles in great books because the author wants to tell you something. In this book, *windows* and *doors* are symbols. Symbols are never completely fixed in Virginia Woolf's novels, so it won't do to try to be too precise or clever. People have argued about the meaning of the *lighthouse*, for example, since the book was first published in 1927. In any case, Mrs. Ramsay is forever closing doors and opening windows:

It was the doors that annoyed her; every door was left open. She listened. The drawing-room door was open; the hall door was open; it sounded as if the bedroom doors were open; and certainly the window on the landing was open; for that she had opened herself. That windows should be open, and doors shut – simple as it was, could none of them remember it? (51)

What really is being open and what is being shut here? And who are these *others* who simply don't get it, don't care, don't see the problem? In the hands of a great writer like Virginia Woolf, a window is never just a window.

Windows are adjustable in terms of regulating the relationship between the outside and the inside; they let the fresh air in, but open doors let the all wild elements in. Forget windows and doors in a summer beach house and symbolize them at a different level. If you open the door to raw life, the Mrs. Ramsays of this world believe that you will destroy order, community and civilization. What is outside of orderly human relationships is not only dangerous but, in human terms, alien, "hostile", "terrible. Life doesn't give a damn about human beings at all. When Mrs. Ramsay tucks her children in at night, she goes to window and pulls it in a little to control "the perfectly indifferent chill night air." (125) She wants to protect her husband, children, friends and acquaintances from raw life.

Life is repeatedly referred to in the novel as Mrs. Ramsay's "old antagonist". (87) She "felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance". (66) What does that tell us about Mrs. Ramsay as a nurturing wife and mother? What can it tell us about the dilemma of someone whose primary role is to protect and nurture others? Dealing with the indifference that is modernity is hard enough for men. For wives and mothers, this battle was:

something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children, nor with her husband. A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it, as it was of her; and sometimes they parleyed (when she sat alone); there were, she remembered, great reconciliation scenes...(66)

Mrs. Ramsay does have her own version of Nietzschean freedom – looking into the abyss – but only when her children are safely tucked in bed or her husband is not making demands for her sympathy.. In those moments where she does not "have to think of anybody"; when she can fold into herself and "this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures", (69) she could go anywhere and be anything. And all of this while she was doing "something dexterous with her needles". Needles are never just needles in this novel, just as windows are never just windows.

Windows are frames, perspective, brackets for enclosing things. *To the Lighthouse* consists of multiple perspectives on individuals and events. If you look through the window of the summer house at Mrs. Ramsay, she might appear to be a beautiful but simplistic wife and mother. That stereotype is repeated by many of the men in the novel, with the notable exceptions William Bankes and Augustus Carmichael who are aware that something else is going on and that Mrs. Ramsay is not exactly as she appears. What Mrs. Ramsay tries to hide from others and occasionally from herself is a recognizably ironic and cynical modern attitude. When thinking about the future of her children, she says “We are in the hands of the Lord”. (70) However, she recognizes the insincerity of this thought right away. She thinks while she knits:

How could any Lord have made this world?...With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death and the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that. She knitted with firm composure, slightly pursing her lips and, without being aware of it, so stiffened and composed the lines of her face in a habit of sternness...(71)

When she delves into herself and her motives, Mrs. Ramsay realizes that she is living a “lie”. Her real self is not a wife and mother but a “core of darkness” that “could go anywhere, for no one saw it”. (69)

Mrs. Ramsay’s *stream of consciousness* reveals a person who is not always “nice” but very capable of expertly dissecting others, especially the men that she nurtures and who depend on her. A great deal of her internal wrath is focused on Charles Tansley who she alternately labels an “awful prig”, an “odious little man”, and an “insufferable bore”. That’s hardly surprising because nobody really likes Charles Tansley. But Mrs. Ramsay’s internal dialogue shows that she has serious problems with her husband as well. Ostensibly, she and Mr. Ramsay are the model of a loving couple, but Mrs. Ramsay quite often has a hate on for her husband. Mr. Ramsay is labeled a “tyrant” (29); he’s “arid” and “sterile” with a “beak of brass” like a harpy devouring all her strength. (43) At various points in the day, and in the early part of dinner, Mrs. Ramsay cannot hide from herself her disgust with her husband’s childishness, imperiousness, and bad temper. What drives her absolutely crazy is his constant whining about his career and demand for sympathy. On the outside, Mrs. Ramsay may be the ideal wife; on the inside she often despises her husband. She has much more genuine sympathy for her son Paul, who *hates* his father.

We get to see the messy inside of the devoted wife and mother in this 1920s novel. One possible *interpretation* of Mrs. Ramsay is that she is a victim of Victorian patriarchy. Her generation was still caught in traditional feminine roles. Women like Mrs. Ramsay could not easily shake off this yoke externally, but many women secretly resented being second class citizens. *To the Lighthouse* can be read as a feminist novel illuminating the confining and destructive character

of rigid gender roles. In this scenario, Mrs. Ramsay easily becomes the outdated model while the independent artist, Lily Briscoe, represents the new liberated woman. By this definition, Mrs. Ramsay provides a window on a tortured consciousness that should be relegated to the past. The problem with this militant feminist interpretation is that does not really do justice to the novel as piece of modernist literature and certainly not to Mrs. Ramsay who has many *triumphs* in Book I. Moreover, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe have more in common than might first appear. One of the most powerful images in the novel is that of Lily hugging Mrs. Ramsay's knees and the revealing conclusion that "intimacy itself... is knowledge" (57)

### **Hell is Other People (but Heaven too)**

Mrs. Ramsay hates her husband sometimes, but not all the time. At the end of Book I, she cannot authentically say the three words her husband wants to hear so very much – *I love you*. She doesn't put her trust in words. She does, however, smile at her husband, and he knows that he loves her. What does it mean – to love someone? It means that there is a moment or that there are moments of loving, of coming together, of connecting. But they don't happen all the time, and they don't even need to happen often, to be very important things in life. Love and connection transcend roles.

Modernity affirms the individual and human beings, as individuals, are ultimately alone. We can never really know another person. Even if we really want to know someone else, as we do when we fall in love, we are faced with the fact that people are complex and people change. Friendships and love fade without ever the principals knowing why. As William Bankes tells us – people just 'drift apart'. How sad, like tears falling into an ocean, says Virginia Woolf. But how much do we really want to know about each other? How many lies does it take to keep relationships going? Mrs. Ramsay sometimes loves and sometimes hates her husband. Hate seems to predominate when at dinner she

could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or any affection for him." She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy – there – and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it. It's all come to an end...(91)

Each of us is a dark solitude that no one can reach the bottom of. We can never know ourselves, so how can we know much less love others? This was not a problem before modernity, when everyone had a role; everyone was a living habit; everyone shared the important meanings. If ultimately people were alone, no one perceived it. The feeling of connection was palpable, and the worst possible life sentence was to be alone. Now some modern individuals like Lily Briscoe and William Bankes actually prefer to be alone.

A modern man and woman might feel nostalgia for a more connected past, but they would find it alternately taxing boring to have to deal with others. "How trifling it all is, how boring it all

is,” thinks William Bankes about having to sit through a single communal dinner. (97) Individualism is not a simple matter of switching a public, communally oriented life for a private life of intimate relations, as some historians, sociologists and political scientists seem to suggest. Being an individual means that we are all to some extent private and apart from one another. This fact changes the entire definition of relationships. Lily Briscoe puts the problem directly at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*:

How then did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them?  
How did one add up this and that and conclude it was liking one felt, or disliking?  
And, to those words, what meaning attached, after all??

Any conclusions that one might draw about other people surely must be qualified and provisional. Even in the most intimate love relationship – what Mrs. Ramsay describes as “the joy, the pure joy of two notes sounding together” could so quickly turn into a “dismal flatness”. The central characters in *To the Lighthouse* constantly confirm the *complexity* and *inadequacy* of human relationships (45) The most successful relationships – like that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay – are extremely fragile. And there are other characters like Augustus Carmichael who have to drug themselves to get rid of the pain of failed relationships.

Loneliness and sadness pervade *To the Lighthouse*. The human ocean is full of tears. The only characters who have no regrets are the children, who Mrs. Ramsay is desperate to protect. She knows, however, that she cannot protect them; that the doors will swing open: and the indifferent chill of real life will get them too. It will be worse, says Mrs. Ramsay, for her most sensitive child, Rose. If she could, she would keep her children innocent of life:

Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day older or Cam either. These two she would have liked to keep for ever just as they were, demons of wickedness, angels of delight, never to see them grow up into long legged monsters. Nothing made up for the loss.

Of course, this attitude partly reflects the nurturing side of Mrs. Ramsay, who was always happiest “carrying a baby in her arms”. But only partly. Mrs. Ramsay was firmly convinced that her children “would never be so happy again”. (65)

Mrs. Ramsay, partly from tradition but mostly from inclination, seeks to create happiness in places where she sees precious little. This mission involves no little insincerity on her part, because she is hyper conscious of lying or being insincere. The communal dinner is her attempt to bring everyone together and to create a happy memory. She’s in despair of achieving this result, especially when she sees her husband at the other end of the table “scowling” like a spoiled child because Augustus Carmichael has asked for another bowl of soup. The success of the dinner – Mrs. Ramsay’s quest for the holy grail – often hangs in the balance. So many different people; so many different agendas; some taking themselves way too seriously. Her



husband's mood is always very precarious; he manages to turn an innocent comment about Scott's *Waverly* novels into an intended indictment of his philosophical career. Charles Tansley continually threatens to ruin everything by interjecting his vulnerable ego and his considerable negativity into the conversation:

Mr. Tansley seemed to be saying. You have wasted your lives. You are all of you wrong. Poor old fogies, you're hopelessly behind the times. He seemed to be rather cocksure, this young man; and his manners were bad.

Mr. Ramsey is in a foul mood; William and Lily would rather be home working; most of the kids were late showing up; Then something magical happened. People laughed; people connected; kids bonded with parents before rushing off to their own world. William and Lily got involved. And even Charles Tansley began to look human in the positive atmosphere.

Why and how the magic happened is less important than it does happen. And when it happens, a little bit of heaven, or an oasis, or a refuge or whatever metaphor you prefer occurs within modernity. The symbol that Virginia Woolf returns to as Mrs. Ramsay's triumphant dinner concludes is, of course, the window. Inside this window at this dinner table, everyone is *comfortable* and *safe* together. Now there is a:

coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the floating, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again to-night she had the feeling that she had had once to-day already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain.

Looking through the window at this little scene of domestic bliss is like looking through a church window. The sacred moment begins when Mrs. Ramsay orders candles to be laid out. What happens inside the Ramsay house is now described in explicitly religious terms. The communal "space at the heart of things" is a spiritual moment in the void that makes everything meaningful:

The voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words.

What happens in the Ramsay household one evening is a "solemn" spiritual experience of community. It is a joyful experience for all concerned. But only Mrs. Ramsay, not anyone else, has a full appreciation of this moment of joy. Unlike in the past, community is not a given. You have to work to create "that community of feeling with other people" that just may be the true

essence of religion. In the modern age, we often seek solitude, but sometimes we need community as well. Mrs. Ramsay reflects on *her* dinner:

Yes, that was done then, accomplished, and as with all things done, became solemn. Now one thought of it, cleared of chatter and emotions, it seemed always to have been, only was shown now, and so being shown struck everything into stability. They would, she thought, going on again, however long they lived, come back to this night, this moon, this wind; this house: and to her too. It flattered her, where she was most susceptible of flattery, to think how, wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven...

Human life in the modern age may be harsh and lonely, but it is not always so. For Mrs. Ramsay, the deepest joys and the most precious moments were joys and moments are those shared with others. The fact that they are ‘moments’, and intermittent, does not make them any the less significant or necessary.

### **A Caring Perspectives on Modern Life**

Mrs. Ramsay would appear a relic of the late Victorian age were it not for the fact that she represents the self-conscious principle of unity in our modern age of distance and difference. The ethos of a civilization created mainly by men comes under serious attack in *To the Lighthouse*, albeit in a relatively gentle and non-militant way. The question the book raises is: do we want the honest, but cold and egotistical masculine viewpoint to dominate modern life? We might usefully distinguish between Mrs. Ramsay the living character and the deeper “tune of Mrs. Ramsay” that Lily Briscoe hopes to discover. (55) We’ve seen some of the notes in that tune already, but let’s describe them in a different way. Mrs. Ramsay is disturbed by several features of modernity that she views as decisive. First, she doesn’t like the fact that modern people are so critical. She sees her children already learning to “debate anything, everything”. She deplores the “strife, divisions, differences of opinion, twisted into the very fibre of being” from a young age. (12) She wants to emphasize bringing people together rather than breaking them apart. Indeed, her entire life’s mission can be described as bringing people together, including the “high and low, rich and poor”

Second, Mrs. Ramsay questions the search for “truth” that usually comes to such pessimistic conclusions about human life. She is not herself an optimist about life, her great *antagonist*. But she is concerned to affirm the optimistic viewpoint for the *sake of others*. The primary symbol of the novel is a “lighthouse”. A lighthouse can reflect light or modern truth seeking, in which case it is a:

hoary Lighthouse, distant austere, in the midst, and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seems to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men.

That, of course, is the view illuminated by lighthouse that Mr. Ramsey prefers. But that's not the only perspective on a lighthouse. James Ramsay's lighthouse is life's adventure and excitement and possibility that his father and Charles Tansley seem so determined to stamp out. Mrs. Ramsay hates them both for disillusioning her son:

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said.

Mrs. Ramsay's own preferred views of the lighthouse are: 1) the protective light that warns people of danger' 2) the long solitary strobe of light that comes through her window at night and that speaks to her soul; and more mundanely but also important to her, 3) the poor household of the lighthouse keeper and his son, that she is knitting the red-brown stockings for.

Third, Mrs. Ramsay condemns modern males for their egotism. Mr. Ramsay and his protégé, Charles Tansley are both wrapped up in themselves and the "I, I, I" that simultaneously screams out the need to be approved, and a deep insecurity if they suspect that approval is not forthcoming. The fact that both Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley might deserve some recognition, the first for his analytical brilliance and the second for his extensive knowledge of things, does not alter the fact for Mrs. Ramsey that these quintessentially modern males, professors and potential leaders, have "bad manners". She opposes this characteristic of modernity with the simple injunction to "be nice". (100-101) Occasionally, Mrs. Ramsay's niceness is criticized as insincerity. And, in an absolute sense, it is insincere. It's a *lie*. It's a *trick* that these direct truth seeking males see as unnecessary and beneath them. But it's also the social glue of human relationships:

She had done the usual trick – been nice. She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst (if it had not been for Mr. Bankes) were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere.

Ironically, Mrs. Ramsay thinks this to herself while listening to Charles Tansley expounds realistically on the life of a lighthouse keeper.

The modern world is critical, egotistical and obsessed with truth seeking at the expense of community and connection. The males who run modernity, or rather *charge* ahead in modernity, are protected from the destructive power of their own agendas by women. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay is an unequal but intermittently loving relationship characterized by a division of labour, where men do the hard thinking and calculating while women do the nurturing. In this relationship, Mrs. Ramsay clearly emerges as the superior person, which could make *To The Lighthouse*, a book written by a woman after all, appear to be *sentimental*. But it would be a mistake to view the novel as sentimental for a number of reasons. Mrs. Ramsay is not naturally sentimental. She's very aware that being *nice* is a trick, and as Bankes and Carmichael notice, it does not come naturally. You might say that being a nurturing female is a *role*, but then you'd be seriously underestimating Mrs. Ramsay, because being a wife and mother is not merely exhausting but often conflicts with her idea of herself. Being a nurturer is a choice. It involves protecting her young from a pessimistic approach to life; affirming the positive ideal over the negative reality; and sacrificing her own independence in order to create a little community. That's not conforming to a sentimental role; that's making an ethical choice.

The characters in the novel are largely symbolic, even though they are based on Virginia Woolf's parents and the people who were part of the Leslie Stephen's (her father) household. It may be difficult to view the central characters in *To the Lighthouse* as symbols because they are so highly individualized; we get into their heads, their subjectivity, and we begin to think of them as unique. Virginia Woolf is a modern writer precisely because it's *individuals* that she wants to talk about; she's not about creating *characters*. And Virginia Woolf is a distinctly *modernist* writer; it's difficult to put a definitive label upon people because personality is so fluid. When considering a person, or even when a person considers himself or herself, it is always through windows or qualifying brackets [ ]. It's hard to know ourselves, much less others. Meanings, for example in the form of the Lighthouse, are always going to be multiple and different for different people at different times. The writer or artist is not to pin down meanings that are multiple but to try to illuminate *one particular thing that matters*, or to cite contemporary jargon, to isolate differences that make a difference.

I fear that all this talk about symbols, and modernist versus modern writing, may be a bit obtuse. So let's get straight to the major light that Virginia Woolf wants to shine on human relations by looking more closely at one of the central characters – Mr. Ramsay. We don't get a complete picture of Mr. Ramsay as a person, but we can clearly recognize him as a type. He's a type that was more common in the late nineteenth-century, but he's still very much around especially in universities. He's the imperious male who thinks he's an authority on everybody and everything. What gives him the right to lord it over others? Today it might be money, but in the nineteenth-century, it was intellect. Mr. Ramsay is an intellectual. It's important to understand what kind of intellectual he is – he's a searcher for truth wherever it leads. He's obsessed with finding things out. He's good at it – not as good as he'd like because he's losing his edge with age – but

he still has “a spending mind” and a host of hangers on to prove it to himself. His ambitions are considerable. He once wanted to know everything from A-Z, but now he’s trying to convince himself that getting to R is O.K.

Mr. Ramsay is not totally one-dimensional. He loves his wife and his family – but loving must be on his terms. He is a typical male authority always making demands on others. He demands that others gratify his wishes, and is a pain in the ass, whenever his desires are thwarted. The term most used to describe him by his wife, when she’s pissed off at him, is *tyrant*. But that’s a negative term spoken out of anger; it might be more accurate to describe him as a person who is always sure of himself and his own rectitude. Why? Not just because he’s an egomaniac – which of course he is – but because what he thinks and what he does is so very *important*. Mr. Ramsay is an important guy; he’s transforming knowledge; he’s creating the leaders of the future. In order to get along with Mr. Ramsay, you’ve got to acknowledge his importance. When we first meet him in the novel, he’s outraged because someone has disturbed his *privacy*. His daughter Cam was running, yelling and bumping into Lily Briscoe and William Banks who were out walking.

This little scene might seem innocuous, but it’s very important to the novel because of what it illuminates. On the one hand, we have a pretty wild but fun loving kid. On the other hand, we have a father who is unresponsive to silly childhood games, and who emerges out of his study absolutely fuming. Virginia Woolf forces us to notice how Mr. Ramsay approaches human relationships. It’s the same way that he approaches his work. He *bears down upon* other people and demands that they conform to his wishes (51). He subdues knowledge and people. The poem that is associated with him throughout the novel is Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” and the phrase in that poem is *Someone had blundered*. If you get on the wrong side of Mr. Ramsay, for whatever reason, you have *blundered*. Needless to say, everyone, especially Mrs. Ramsay, has to pussyfoot around this self-important autocrat. Mr. Ramsay *is* important; the work he *is* doing *is* important. But part of Virginia Woolf’s message can be summed up in that trite contemporary expression: “it’s nice to be important; but it’s more important to be nice”. Human relationships are not just about leading and following; they are about connecting. That’s only part of Virginia Woolf’s message. The other part is that it’s not easy to create community in modern life. Modern life is *against* community; modern life is characterized by distance and difference from others; in an important sense, creating community means being an *antagonist* of modernity.

## Love and Marriage

*To the Lighthouse* is often described as a book about childhood and marriage. It’s easy to get lost in the particulars of an idyllic summer childhood and its and powerful parents. The childhood in the novel is an idyllic but already fading childhood and, as such, it mirrors the expulsion from the garden of Eden and the harsh glare of knowledge of good and evil. Just as

Mrs. Ramsay knows that her children cannot remain happy and protected forever, so too modernity systematically dismantles the old connectivity – the sense of belonging of communities in the past. The move to modernity was nothing new when Virginia Woolf wrote the novel. Old ideas of community had been under attack since the Enlightenment when social relationships were refashioned to allow greater room for individual choice. The old connection between people had been eroding for generations. In the new individualistic environment, the most important glue between increasingly solitary individuals was love and marriage.

While she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf visited Thomas Hardy, who she greatly admired. It would be interesting to know if they discussed love and marriage – a theme that was central in the thinking of both authors. In any case, there was a significant shift in thinking about love and marriage by 1927. One of the questions of *To the Lighthouse* is – is love still possible and can marriage work? If Mr. Ramsay is obsessed with truth or at least knowledge from A to R, Mrs. Ramsay is obsessed with love institutionalized by marriage. When she views Lily and William at the beginning of the novel, she pictures them in love. She thinks everyone should marry. She radiates the message *love and be happy* so palpably that Paul catches the vibration of love from her and proposes to the formerly sad but now positively glowing servant girl Minta. The message of Mrs. Ramsay is that love is the most positive, beautiful and exciting experience/relationship possible and, by implication, that it compensates for all the loneliness, separation and pain of modern life.

Virginia Woolf wants readers to feel the maximum power of emotion of love and the promise of deep connection to another person that is marriage. Love is so transformative that it is allowed to play the decisive unifying role at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner. Paul's breathlessness breaks the ice and Minta radiates a joy that completely neutralizes the aggression (the *fangs*) of Charles Tansley and Mr. Ramsay. The latter begins to tease Minta and eventually to laugh together with his children and the dinner guests. A deep and sacred sense of connection is achieved before the children rush off to their own separate agendas. Mrs. Ramsay's *faith* in the power of love appears to be born out, not only at the dinner, but also afterwards when Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay go upstairs. The love scene at the end of Book I is intricately drawn and worth exploring in detail. Mrs. Ramsay's belief that love can conquer distance and difference and make an otherwise meaningless life *meaningful* is ostensibly affirmed in beautiful prose.

She knew that he was thinking. You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful. Will you not tell me just for once that you love me? He was thinking that, for he was roused, what with Minta and his book, and to being the end of the day and their having quarreled about going to the Lighthouse. But she could not do it, she could not say it...And she looked at him and began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, nothing on earth can equal this happiness) --

“Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow’. She had not said it, but he knew it. And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. (136)

What could beat this touching, tender recognition of love that did not require words? Mrs. Ramsay and love “triumph again”. All the nastiness and tension seem to go out the relationship because of this intimate recognition of love that does not need words.

If only it were that simple. A believer in love, like Mrs. Ramsay, has to deliberately bury many the subtexts in the husband-wife relationship to affirm the marriage. She can find enough precious ‘moments’ in the relationship to make it meaningful and to affirm loving. But love does not just happen. It takes tremendous effort on her part to give her love to a man who always wants her to submit – even if is saying “I love you”. Just prior to the famous smile, she could feel his “mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind” and wanting to deny her what he called her “pessimism”. Her ability to connect depends on feeling that she is not forced to say “I love you” and has her independence, while his depends on a feeling of certainty that he loves her. This is not love freely given and received but love in brackets [ ]. While Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay may have a feeling of connection, they still remain solitudes towards one another. And their special moment – a moment they might both remember all their lives – was further bracketed by highly problematic thoughts and statements of Mrs. Ramsay. “Slowly it came into her head”:

Why is it that people want to marry? What was the value, the meaning of things?

This skepticism about marriage by the champion of marriage renders love’s affirmation, if not meaningless, at least highly problematic. Moreover, the concluding lines of Book I are puzzling in the extreme. After saying that “every word they said now would be true”, Mrs. Ramsay says: “Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet to-morrow”. She refuses to say I love you but acknowledges her husband’s superiority by denying the possibility of getting to the Lighthouse. She affirms his vision of truth against her and her children’s illusions.

What is so brilliant about the concluding pages of Book I of *To the Lighthouse*, is that they can be read either as sympathetic with or nugatory of Mrs. Ramsay’s approach to love and marriage. The ending of Book I is highly ambiguous. The novel as a whole is not so ambiguous. Mrs. Ramsay’s protestations notwithstanding, Woolf overwhelmingly defines modern love as a problem and certainly not a solution. Let’s start with the relationship between Paul and Minta that plays such a decisive role in the success of dinner and Mr. Ramsay’s renewed affection towards his wife. They are not so much in love with each other as they are in love with an ideal, pushed upon Paul by Mrs. Ramsay. After kissing and nurturing Minta, Paul:

Saw the lights of the town beneath them, the lights coming out suddenly one by one seemed like things that were going to happen to him – his marriage, his children, his house; and again he thought, as they come out on to the high road,

which was shaded with high bushes, how they would retreat into solitude together, and walk on and on, he always leading her, and she pressing close to his side (as she did now). (81)

Does this sound like a promising relationship to you? Revealingly, Paul can't wait to relay what he calls "an appalling experience" and the "worst moment of his life" to Mrs. Ramsay "because he felt somehow that she was the person who had made him do it." (86) It makes you wonder about the nature of Mrs. Ramsay's obsession with love and marriage when you consider how little she thinks of Minta (who can't even get simple tasks straight) and Paul who she refers to more than once as a "boobie". Of course, Mrs. Ramsay often says that she prefers *boobies* to people who write dissertations and books. But she didn't marry a *bobby* and you can't ever see her doing so.

The novel as a whole asks the question: is love really a necessary emotion? For Mrs. Ramsay, clearly it is an article of faith. But she's a sufficiently complex individual that even she has her doubts. Doubts that would never be made public, but that do rise up privately. When doling out the Boeuf en Daube:

she peered into the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine, and thought, This will celebrate the occasion – a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound – for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering-eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garlands.

Mrs. Ramsay is not convinced of her own truth. Consistency of belief, for example, would make her favour Minta the bride over Lily the spinster. While Lily "faded under Minta's glow" – a glow that captivates everyone including her husband – Mrs. Ramsay internally decides in favour of Lily:

Lily at forty would be the better. There was in Lily a thread of something **of her own** which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared.

Mrs. Ramsay cannot help but seeing something superior in this probable spinster, something that had to do with her *thread of individuality*.

As for Lily Briscoe, herself, the visit to the summer house is a tutorial in independence. She begins by wanting to capture the magic of the Ramsay's relationship – true and abiding love --in her painting. She wants to describe, abstractly to be sure, a complex powerful emotion that she views as the colour purple. But as she gains insights into the uneven and restricting nature of the



relationship between the Ramsays, she moves love further and further from the middle of her painting, eventually replacing it with a tree. The Paul and Minta episode affects her dramatically, as it does everyone else, but leaves her undecided about love's significance. "It is so beautiful, so exciting, this love," she says, "that I tremble on the verge of it". (111) Nine out of ten people, she continued, would say that they "want nothing but this". Reflecting upon herself and her own personal experience, however, Lily projects:

This is not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than love; yet it is also beautiful and necessary.

How is love beautiful? Why is it necessary? Lily doesn't say, but we can speculate. Love has had a certain magic to it in many cultures. It has inspired poetry and art. More prosaically, It has been important as a way of creating familial alliances and kinship networks. Love has an ancient history. In the modern world, however, love's beauty and necessity serve different purposes. Individualism is liberating but unsatisfying. Modernity is cold, calculating and impersonal. Love becomes increasingly important to modernity as the antithesis, the antidote and as the alternative to a world that many perceive as ugly. But is love the answer?

Love only retains its magic when it is an article of faith, as it is for Mrs. Ramsay. "The sun of love of men and women rose over the rim of her tablecloth" and Mrs. Ramsay "bent towards it and greeted it". (119) That is part of the *tune of Mrs. Ramsay*, but is it still our tune. If love gets in the way of individualization, of finding or creating oneself, it is bound to become something ambiguous. As a rich and beautiful ideal, it does not simply disappear, but it does become a question mark. Love and marriage clearly became problems in the nineteenth-century, especially for women, and they have not ceased to be problematic for us.

### **Concluding Remarks**

*To the Lighthouse* in part is a nostalgic sepia-toned window on the past and, in part, is a precise micro examination of the great divide between human beings in the present. Mrs. Ramsay obviously represents a past that was already disappearing before her own eyes. Her attempts to create unity and harmony in the *stream of life* are successful to a point, but doomed in the long term. And she knows she's fighting a losing battle with modern life. The modern world she lives in, which I shouldn't need to remind you, is an increasingly divided world. Once you get past the wife, mother, hostess and matchmaker, Mrs. Ramsay is a recognizably complex modern woman. She's divided in herself. Part of her is cynical of caring and community.

It's easy to see Mrs. Ramsay as the past, and someone like Lily Simcoe as the future. But there's a kinship between them and not just because they are both intelligent women. Their strategies might be different, but they are both committed to addressing a huge problem in modern life – the lack of connection. Mrs. Ramsay represents the past by affirming decency and politeness (*niceness*) and love and marriage as the glue that will hold modern society together and prevent it

from spinning off into difference. Lily Simcoe is not so mesmerized by Mrs. Ramsay's talents to allow herself to be trapped into rules and roles that are increasingly self-destructive. Mrs. Ramsay's solutions will not be those of Lily Briscoe. But the problem that Mrs. Ramsay, and many intelligent women of the past, identified was the need to create islands of caring and community in a sea of indifference.

Nietzsche believed that, if modern men and women were really liberated, they could transcend community and create individual meanings. The air that Nietzsche's supermen and women breathed was cold and pure. Virginia Woolf obviously didn't agree. Caring and community are important to her, not just as female values, but as human values. Are they important to you? Then what are you going to do about it? Caring and community are not the responsibility of somebody else. You have only yourself to blame if the world is an uncaring place.

## **To the Lighthouse: Lecture Two**

### **Introduction**

*To the Lighthouse* is a book about two powerful parents, loosely based on Virginia Woolf's mother and father. That in itself is a fascinating theme. How do you come to terms with your parents' influence and beliefs? The legacy of our parents is something that each of us has to deal with on our road to independent adulthood. Sometimes, the more interesting and influential the parents, the more difficult often it is to forge an identity for oneself.

The modern world ratchets up the difficulty considerably for two rather obvious reasons. First, modernity is all about *autonomy* or the freedom to choose a life direction for oneself. Second, modernity is all about *change*. As Bob Dylan says, metaphorically of course, you can *never go home*. Or as Virginia Woolf says, you can *never repeat*. Home won't be there to go back to. That's why Nietzsche says that if you want to embrace modernity and its freedom, you have to focus on creating your own future. Easier said than done.

The current pace of modernity is such that today becomes yesterday real fast and the world created by your parents' generation is *old school*. To be sure, what's old may become new again but it loses any original meaning that it might have once had. Borrowing from the past is like rummaging through a vintage clothing store, where the modern consumer plays dress up without bothering very much about what the people were like who originally wore those clothes, what their hopes and dreams were.

We are much more comfortable with change than our recent ancestors. Even when we are not entirely comfortable with our present, when we wish for a simpler past, we are inured to change. Our terminology is based on change. We seek everything that is *new*, and we want the latest iPhone, iPod and iPad. We like to use words like *revolution*; really, we abuse the word because we are neither as original nor as courageous as that term supposes. What we really mean is that we easily get *bored* when nothing seems to be happening. Maybe that's why we late moderns have trouble reading books like *To the Lighthouse* – because nothing seems to be happening. The little sailing ship with Cam and James keeps stopping dead in the water. And like Cam and James, we are relieved when – *whoosh* – the wind comes up, fills our sails, and we are on the move again. A lot may be going on, however, when it seems that nothing is happening.

### **The Death of Civilization**

It's instructive to consider that *To the Lighthouse* is about a civilization that, with all its finds and faults, its *lights and shadows*, was once the most powerful and influential in the world. British civilization invented the modern world. The Empire that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay represent gave us

modern science, modern literature, and modern politics. Empiricism, logical positivism, the theory of evolution were among the scientific products of this civilization. The characteristic modern literary form – the novel – was invented by the British. The concepts of the individual, democracy and world peace were, arguably, British inventions. Civilizations can be described positively and negatively. Sitting and wool-gathering in the little sailboat, Cam describes the once vibrant British civilization:

From her hand, ice cold, held deep in the sea, there spurted up a fountain of joy at the change, at the escape, at the adventure (that she should be alive, that she should be there). And the change falling from the sudden, and unthinking fountain of joy fell here and there on the dark, the slumberous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realized but turning in their darkness, catching here and there, a spark of light; Greece. Rome, Constantinople. Small as it was, and shaped like a leaf stood on end with the gold sprinkled waters flowing in and about it, it had, she supposed, a place in the universe – even that little island? The old gentlemen in the study she thought could have told her... (it might be Mr. Carmichael or Mr. Bankes, very old, very stiff). (201)

British civilization here is lovingly being described as a light in the darkness. The deliberately vague symbol that is the Lighthouse finally takes a definitive shape as the ‘joy’ and ‘adventure’ that was nineteenth-century Britain – the Britain of Virginia Woolf’s parents that now was disappearing.

By the early twentieth century British civilization still may have seemed dominant but it was already crumbling from forces without and forces within. Like other great civilizations in the past, Britain thought that it had a right to ‘dominate’, that others should ‘submit’ to its superiority. For some strange reason, other European countries did not want to recognize Britain’s hegemony and the resulting scramble for Empire led to World War I. The Great War, as it was called, revealed the tyranny and hypocrisy of the civilization that is symbolized by Mr. Ramsay’s blundering in, demanding submission or beseeching sympathy. The stark reality of Empire is revealed in [brackets] in the section “Time Passes” when the children of the elite, like Andrew Ramsay, were killed in battle. Andrew was killed “mercifully instantly” but British power and authority was undergoing a slower death. Already in “The Window”, we witness the decline and decay of an aging civilization. Mrs. Ramsay is always closing doors, but change is creeping in. The money’s beginning to run short; she’s afraid to tell her husband about the repairs need to the greenhouse. The servants are proving increasingly difficult as well. The old order is breaking down.

We late modern global readers well may think that’s a good thing. British civilization was the superficial veneer – the self-justifying gloss -- on an elitist, colonizing, unequal, smug and

tyrannical society. That, of course, is easier to see from a *distance*. As Lily Briscoe succinctly puts it:

Distance had an extraordinary power; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone for ever, they had become part of the nature of things. It was so calm; it was so quiet. (204)

For those who are ‘swallowed up in it’, however, the decline of civilization is always experienced as a great tragedy. Bereft of meaningfulness, the British Isles is just a narrow and barren patch of land in a turbulent and indifferent ocean. It’s not just Great Britain,, but all civilization, ultimately, is meaningless:

Indeed they were very close to the Lighthouse how. There it loomed up, stark and straight, glaring white and black, and one could see the waves breaking in white splinters like smashed glass upon the rocks. One could see lines and creases in the rocks. One could see the windows clearly; a dab of white on one of them, and a little tuft of green on the rock. A man had come out and looked at them through a glass and gone in again. So it was like that, James thought, the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years, it was a stark tower on a bare rock. It satisfied him. (219-20)

James is the person who is satisfied. He’s satisfied because he’s in revolt against his father who he perceives as an unjust tyrant. He represents everyone everywhere who has been victimized by oppression. James is on a mission – he has a ‘compact’ that he has made with Cam and will make with countless others in his life. The ‘compact’ is to fight domination wherever it exists. He will become a ‘lawmaker’ and will spend his life seeking ‘justice’ for the oppressed.

Justice is the one powerful ideal that remains once tradition and civilization are deconstructed. But James is not entirely happy about this state of affairs. Part of him wishes he could still see that ‘other Lighthouse’, that harmonious world, that his mother created for him. But she “had risen somehow and gone away and left him there, impotent, ridiculous, sitting on the floor grasping a pair of scissors” (202) James still wants to believe in the meaningful world of surprise and adventure that is anything but this arid, dry, austere Lighthouse:

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening, one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (202)

But what remains of a civilization whose light has blown out? Unless you are willing to ‘move on’, you feel powerless, miserable, and lost. Mr. Ramsay is always quoting poetry. In ‘The Window’, the poem that dominates proceedings is ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. It’s the

poem of a civilization that still has some vitality, even if *someone had blundered* and the charge ended up being pointless. It was still glorious to *do or die*. The poem that gets repeated in ‘The Lighthouse’ section is William Cowper’s ‘The Castaway’ where:

No voice divine the storm allayed,  
 No light propitious shone,  
 When, snatched from all effectual aid,  
 We perished each alone;  
 But I beneath a rougher sea,  
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

The verdict is pretty gloomy. There are different kinds of gloom, of course. There’s a melancholy gloom, that looks back sadly and nostalgically, and there’s a kind of heroic gloom that seeks to go down with the sinking ship. But gloomy is gloomy.

Is there any way out of this gloom for those who have been *swallowed up* by a dying civilization or do we just *perish each alone*? Not an easy question to answer or, at least, the answer is not a given.

### **The Deserted House**

Now, this is York University and not a 1927 drawing room. So I see many of you thinking *boo hoo, what’s any of this got to do with me?* Maybe nothing; maybe something. A waning civilization that formerly was full of meaning forces you to confront a very big question: “what is the meaning of life”? Or we can state that better as “what is the meaning of *my life*”? Just as long as life is going in a groove, you can avoid these questions. But when life throws you a curve ball, perhaps the death of your parents or a loved one, then you might find yourself pondering the really big questions. Or, of course, you could avoid them altogether. Up to you.

It’s always going to be up to you to decide what meaning you want to give to your life. That’s what being a free individual in the modern age is all about. But, while you don’t have to agree with what someone like Virginia Woolf thinks, it is very helpful that someone else has considered the universal question. In fact, it’s so hard and painful to think about some of these things and to try to come out the other side that you can’t help but be grateful. From Virginia Woolf, I learned that the little details in life are usually the most critically important. I learned that the most important meanings in our lives are the ones we create for ourselves. I learned that it takes courage and will power to think for oneself. I learned that we have to be prepared to *perish alone*.

In the section of *To the Lighthouse* called 'Time Passes', Virginia Woolf reveals the great secret of life as *death*. Death isn't such a huge problem in traditional or vital societies because we have a shared culture to fall back on. We might die, but our shared meanings do not die; our shared life continues, just without us. At best, we end up in heaven or reincarnated in some improved version. At the very least, our loved ones think about us occasionally. We don't need to confront our death or personal annihilation. But the death of a civilization -- an entire way of living, loving and thinking -- confronts us with an awful truth. Ultimately, we *perish alone*; when we die, our universe dies with us. There is no home; the house is deserted; and the dead are not even lonely ghosts.

It gets worse if you read Virginia Woolf carefully. Even while we are living, we are all alone. Do we ever really know one another? Your perception is not my perception. Connection with others is based largely on illusions or, as Virginia Woolf puts it *lies*. The house is deserted. The house is always already deserted; we just pretend that it is inhabited. At the very beginning of 'Time Passes', Virginia Woolf describes the "immense darkness" that is the human condition:

Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, 'This is he' or 'This is she'. Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness. (137-8)

Pretty damn bleak. Virginia Woolf wants to remind us that this is the house *after* people have returned to it, after it has been refurbished, and the likeable Mr. Carmichael is reassuringly reading his Virgil.

Prior to the return of people to the summer home, the summer home was not just metaphorically deserted. All the while people were dying in the First World War, the home was empty. God took a look inside, but deserted it as if "it does not please him". (139) God has already been gone a long time, however, for many modern. Even without God, it is possible to feel *at home* in this world. It's possible to make the world *the compass of the soul*; to feel connected. That gets much harder as people are killing each other in the trenches. Even without warfare, death creeps in and mocks human connection. Mrs. Ramsay dies somewhat mysteriously. Mr. Ramsay *stretches his arms out in the darkness* (possibly suggesting suicide) and she's no longer there. His son Andrew dies in the war. His daughter Prue, the most like her mother in grace and beauty, dies in childbirth. The summer home records none of these monumental events, but stays empty.

Nature begins to occupy the uninhabited terrain. The garden is overrun; weeds take over every nook and cranny; butterflies beat their wings vainly against the windowpane. Terms like ‘occupy’ and ‘overrun’ are merely descriptive, however, because Nature is just nature. It has no connection to human beings. People formerly replaced God with Nature; they saw themselves mirrored in Nature; contemplating nature stirred “the most sublime reflections and led to the most comfortable conclusions”(146) But Nature doesn’t give a damn about human beings. There is no inherent harmony in Nature and certainly not between Nature and humanity. Nature doesn’t need human beings. What happens to the deserted summer house is “unendurable”, “horrible”. The wind-blown flowers in the garden urns “standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless and so terrible”. (147) The deserted house has been deserted by God, overrun by Nature, and emptied of anything human.

A deserted house might seem a completely unredeeming and desolate thing. But there is a fascination with a decaying structure that is entirely modern. When you get past the lack of human beings and the indifference of nature, it’s possible to feel a wonderful and sublime sense of solitude. It’s a totally individualistic kind of escape from any restrictions. Only a modern person would ever suggest that loneliness is ‘lovely’. Virginia Woolf’s description of the empty summer house has a very contemporary feel to it:

Loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary, like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pool in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen. Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs en the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions – ‘Will you fade? Will you perish?’ – scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain. (141)

That *loveliness and stillness* could seem so very compelling reflects several moods simultaneously. It reflects the reflective mood, of folding into oneself and escaping the demands of human contact. It reflects absorption into a pre-Edenic void of being where there are no meanings to create, regret or rethink. As a number of nineteenth-century as well as contemporary analysts have suggested, this kind of contemplation also reflects the *death wish* that is a routine characteristic of highly sensitive and refined modern individuals. Virginia Woolf was such an individual and indeed she did commit suicide.

### **Finding That One Thing That Matters**

There are lots of things that irritate me, including lite beer and anything Bollywood, but what really makes me boil is people who enjoy dissing writers like Virginia Woolf and Friedrich



Nietzsche because they ended up with mental problems or committed suicide. I always feel like saying to them: “you are probably mediocre; when you write beautiful books that the world still reads; then you may have the right to feel in any way superior”. In some ways, writers like Woolf and Nietzsche suffered a lot so that you and I don’t have to. They fearlessly explored the modern psyche to tell us something important.

God isn’t there. Nature doesn’t care. So, what you gonna do? Nietzsche tells you to be brave and create your own reality as an artist philosopher. Life is lived as an individual on the surface, so live it freely, exuberantly and with joy. Don’t pity others; don’t care too much for others; don’t be pulled down by the herd. Virginia Woolf agrees with Nietzsche’s premise; but not with all of his conclusions. Her father was, in certain respects, a Nietzschean male, who badly wounded others, including his wife and Virginia Woolf’s mother. As much as he or she might wish, the artist never creates in a vacuum. The artist is a human being involved in human relationships. Art must reflect those relationships. To be sublimely solitary is something all of us wish for at times, but it is ultimately a self-defeating strategy.

Taking human relationships into account, discovering connective threads between human beings, takes immense effort because modern individuals really are lonely, solitary human beings. Some of the most likeable characters in *To the Lighthouse*, William Banks, Lily Briscoe, and Mr. Carmichael are loners by design or from experience. Moreover, the creative work that they do benefits considerably from this sense of aloneness and could conceivably suffer from too close a connection with others. Lily Briscoe, for example, feels that other people looking too closely at her art or her life choices will destroy her trust in herself. That might seem a feminine weakness but Banks and Carmichael are highly suspicious of Mrs. Ramsay precisely because of her intruding interpersonal agendas. If you want to be a creative modern person, or even a successful modern individual for that matter, you need to protect you’re aloneness, your deep individuality. That’s always going to be difficult at any time, but the rules and roles of late Victorian England made relationships particularly treacherous.

Virginia Woolf’s answer to the question: “what is most meaningful in modern life?” is not all that difficult to answer. I already answered it in the last lecture. It isn’t grand ideals that you can strive for, or comforting relationships that comfort and cocoon you, it’s moments of inspiration and connection. There are solitary moments of inspiration, as when Mrs. Ramsay connects at night with that solitary lighthouse beam that is just for her and her alone. There are also wonderful communal moments, such as when the Boef en Daube dinner comes off. The solitary and the communal moments need to be in balance or modern society makes no sense. But, and this is crucial, they also need to be balanced within the modern individual or the modern individual makes no sense. Mr. Ramsay is hated always by his son James, and sometimes by his wife, because he plays the role of the authoritarian male, masking the immature baby looking for sympathy. Mrs. Ramsay is infinitely more likeable, but she continually plays the ‘nice’ card, repressing her intelligence and autonomy. Whether Mr. Ramsay is more of a thinker and Mrs.

Ramsay more of a feeler is irrelevant. Both thinking and feeling are necessary for a balanced human life.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* illuminates moments of feeling and connection without being overly sentimental. In the section 'The Window', Woolf shows how ugly thinking without consideration of others, as well as how beautiful and unappreciated caring for others, can be. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are outdated role models and their relationship, while seemingly perfect, is vicious and destructive. Intelligent readers should have come to this conclusion already by the time they get to the final section of the book, no matter how much they may like Mrs. Ramsay. The final section destroys the traditional masculine/feminine dynamic and dichotomy in order to affirm something new.

At first, it might not appear that there is not much that is new about Mr. Ramsay. He still comes off as a tyrant, ordering the reluctant teenagers Cam and James, on an *expedition* to the Lighthouse. He's his old irritable and sympathy seeking self in his interactions with Lily Briscoe who, like before, feels the need to protect her picture from his potential judgment. During the trip to the Lighthouse, Cam and James are continually fearful that they will do something wrong and that their father will explode. Mr. Ramsay's still caught up in heroic posturing; he singles himself out for special attention as the most heroically suffering individual in "The Castaway". As well, there's considerable ambiguity about Mr. Ramsay's attitude in the final approach to the Lighthouse, which James interprets as his indominable 'God is Dead' stand.

But wait a minute. Everything about Mr. Ramsay is undercut and we begin to see a different side of this imposing person. First, just when the reader and Lily Briscoe want to kill Mr. Ramsay, we find ourselves in the *land of boots*. Mr. Ramsay manages to get out of his habit of sympathy, happy to talk about what it means to have good boots. Instead of challenging Lily Briscoe into submission, he ends up smiling towards her. He goes off whistling although, technically, she denied him the sympathy she was seeking. For her part, Lily Briscoe finally begins to regard him as worthy of sympathy, although she's not going to fall into the bottomless pit that would mean giving it to him. That's a fairly straightforward change of relationship. Mr. Ramsay no longer looks at Lily Briscoe solely as a weak female to be dominated but as someone his ex-wife liked. She views him as a more sympathetic character and is able to see him less as a threat than as someone who is lonely and getting old.

The children are a different matter entirely. Unlike Lily Briscoe, they have felt their father's wrath much more deeply and, consequently have entered in a pact against him. It's a common strategy for children of authoritarian parents; they may give them obedience but they will not give them love. Mr. Ramsay wants *both* obedience and love, especially from his daughter Cam. He attempts to engage her by talking about their new puppy: who will be feeding him while they are on their expedition? What will they name him? His old dog's name was Frisk. What Cam believes is that her father would love her to name the new puppy Frisk, but like Lily Briscoe, she

won't give him the satisfaction. James is so sullenly hostile towards his father that he no longer cares about getting to the Lighthouse because it is his father's and not his agenda. When the sailboat stalls, he suppresses all his natural inclinations for adventure, and takes pleasure in the fact that the plans of the father might fail. And, again, when closing in on the Lighthouse, he affirms his harsh judgment of his father as the one who ruined his childhood paradise with the mother. The mother, and not the father, is the ideal image both teenage children carry with them to their destination. The mother represents the garden of Eden and the father the arid and barren rock that they are going to.

Fair enough. But all of this too is undercut skillfully by Virginia Woolf. Just as there is more than one Lighthouse, so to there is more than one possible perspective on the father. The children keep waiting for their father to explode when things don't go his way. But he's absorbed in his book, which is a little old worn book of Plato that is engrossing him. He doesn't explode. He converses with the fisherman who is guiding their expedition, showing a more human side, because he really does like fishermen. His daughter, Cam, who sides with her brother and who refuses to fall for the 'puppy' ploy, still finds herself warming up to him, enjoying looking at his delicate hands and feet dangling in the boat. He appears more human. She feels that she loves him, although she doesn't want to show it. The reason for the expedition to the Lighthouse, and Mr. Ramsay's insistence that it be taken, is not fully articulated. But we have hints that challenge our earlier verdict on Mr. Ramsay. Perhaps he wants to make it up to James that they didn't go to the Lighthouse last time around, when he was so cynical about it and argued with his wife. Moreover, he's carrying some parcels for the family of the Lighthouse keeper, a mission that he obviously sees as following through on his wife's wishes.

Distance changes everything and, in hindsight Mr. Ramsay appears a much more sympathetic character. That's what Lily Briscoe says and she wishes she could find him to convey some very important information, but she missed him and he's well on the way to the Lighthouse. Her insight is something about Mrs. Ramsay, but it's not clear what. His wife has appeared as a ghost or a vision in the window of the summer house where she first sat for Lily Briscoe's failed attempts at mother/child and wife/husband portraits. Much has changed as well in the mental relationship that Lily Briscoe holds towards Mrs. Ramsay. She was once the heroine/victim in Lily Briscoe's world view of what it meant to be woman. But nothing is black and white, and now Lily sees Mrs. Ramsay as a more complex individual in shades of grey. Mrs. Ramsay is no longer a heroine because Lily now knows that she was wrong, and sometimes seriously, in venerating love and marriage, including perhaps her own marriage. The relationship between Paul and Minta negates several propositions about a successful marriage, but especially the imperative of love. Similarly, Lily feels real love for William Bankes, but no longer has any desire to marry him. Mrs. Ramsay was articulating an ideal of love and marriage that, as a highly intelligent woman, she did not really believe.

None of these realizations about Mrs. Ramsay seriously diminishes the close connection that Lily Briscoe continues to feel to her. In fact, Lily Briscoe is all the more determined to capture the real Mrs. Ramsay for her unfinished portrait. Then – is it a vision or ghost – Mrs. Ramsay seems to appear at the window to sit for Lily Briscoe one last time. What does it mean? It could mean several things. But since Lily Briscoe wants to find Mr. Ramsay when it happens, I think it means that Mrs. Ramsay is saying goodbye. She no longer has any interest in interfering anyone's love life. She leaves the interpretation of her life -- the window or perspective -- to the artist and then disappears. Could it be that Mrs. Ramsay liberates Lily Briscoe from the Victorian ideal of wife and mother. Now Lily Briscoe can paint her according to her own wishes.

The painting is hugely important but it's matched in significance by something that happens as Mr. Ramsay's little skiff comes towards the island and the lighthouse, something so seemingly inconsequential that you could miss it if you were not paying attention to the 'moment'. They were simultaneously eating their lunch and sailing past the rocks where, in times gone by, a ship had sunk in rough weather. James is steering them through, and very well according to Mr. Macalister the fisherman. As they sail into the safety of the harbor, Mr. Ramsay says the two words that his son has been waiting for all his life:

Well done!

What do we all want? If you ask people in a large group what they want out of life, they will probably say that they want love. But love is the weirdest thing. Love is complicated and a close ally of hate. Mrs. Ramsay's love for her husband easily turns into hate. Do we need love; especially that kind of love? We do need moments of connection, especially when we are approved of by others. Cam underlines the importance of the "Well done! for James:

There! Cam thought, addressing herself silently to James. You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or at his father or at any one. There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright, looking rather sulk and frowning slightly. He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody take away a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he was perfectly indifferent. But you've got it now. Cam thought.

Why was it so important, what Mr. Ramsay said to his son? Why would Cam and James have given him anything, at that moment, if he asked for it? If you have to ask, you've missed the entire point of the novel.

### **Art as a Representation of [Modern] Reality**

Modern life is overwhelmingly about individual moments painted in memory. It is rarely about the big events of life – in *To the Lighthouse*, writing dissertations, being famous, being beautiful, and even practicing philanthropy. These are only the *outlines* of an individual's life, the roles and duties that people play. It's the details that matter more than the outlines that set the individual apart. The things that one remembers are little things, but things pregnant with meaning. A kiss, a smile, a glance, a gesture, a laugh, a word of approval, a moment of looking at something together. It's amazing how a moment will represent in our mind an entire section of our past. Mrs. Ramsay knitting, for example.

Moments are the emotional tips of subjective human icebergs. Ninety per cent of what is important in our lives lies beneath the surface. To appreciate that moment of satisfaction that James feels with his father's approval, you have to be able to tunnel down into some very messy and often ambiguous human material. It is the moment that crystallizes the significance of that material and gives a life its meaning. When we glimpse Mrs. Ramsay knitting, seemingly placidly, we conjure up the enormous effort that it took a Victorian/Edwardian woman to nurture others and herself. That female self was divided and the personal part suffered immeasurably. It was an heroic self-sacrifice that was stunningly admirable, but also very destructive as an ideal.

Momentary tips of subjective icebergs. That's only one way of defining late modernity. But it will do for now. How does art capture this reality of seeming superficial moments and submerged emotions? Virginia Woolf shows us how to *read* modernity through multiple perspectives [windows], constant qualifications [brackets], stream of consciousness explorations, leading to moments of crystallization. A narrative or history of a person or a set of events leading to a climax – these tell the modern reader something to be sure but not what he/she really want to know. Narrative stories don't tell us much about an individual. Internal time trumps external time. What goes on inside is decisive. Only one part of *To the Lighthouse* is about the passage of time and most of the comments about what actually happened during that time is in [brackets]. The depiction of time is largely poetic. The section itself acts as a narrow bridge between different moments in time. What is important is not what actually happens as it is how people perceive these moments.

Lily Briscoe is a painter rather than a writer..She is trying to represent the moment, the details that matter on her canvas. When we first meet her in the novel, we learn a part of what it means to be a late modern artist. The decision to paint a subject, in this case Mrs. Ramsay, is a choice. Why paint that asks William Bankes? Why indeed, answers Lily Briscoe. The subject needs to be something personally meaningful rather than anything conventional. The canvas itself is a blank upon which the artist places meaning. Why single out Mrs. Ramsey and how do you represent her? The discussion between William Bankes and Lily Briscoe is instructive. The way that society views Mrs. Ramsay is not as an individual in her own right but as a wife and mother. That's the traditional view of women, even powerful women. William Bankes refers to the Renaissance motif of Madonna and Child. But Lily already wants something more; to get at

the special connection between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. The story of the painting is a story about Lily's increasing dissatisfaction with all traditional meanings. As she learns about the tensions in the Ramsay marriage, and the effort involved in protecting her children from modern life, she is tempted to replace an intense human relationship with a tree. The more you learn about human beings the more you might be inclined to prefer trees. But that would be a cop out, and Lily Briscoe will not end up settling for a tree.

The modern representation of reality, of course, has abstract. Lily is trying to capture the essence of an intense relationship, which she initially interprets as a vibrant purple. But modern life is ambiguous, a mixture of shadows with light. No one colour is likely to do because modern individuals are complex. Traditional notions of good and evil, right and wrong, saints and sinners are just not going to cut it. Right from the get go, Lily Briscoe is concerned to represent the complex person that is Mrs. Ramsay. She wrestles with her subject until the end of the book. She tunnels deeper and deeper down into the real Mrs. Ramsay. But you can never really know another person. So what is it that you are tunneling down into? You are going deeper and deeper into yourself. You are finding a part of yourself in another person. The other person is not an ideal type, or a role model, like they might have been in the past. The other person is a sounding board or reflecting mirror. What Lily Briscoe is really learning about is herself.

The moment that comes to count for Lily Briscoe the artist is the memory of being at the beach with Mrs. Ramsay and Charles Tansley. On the one hand, Lily doesn't like Tansley because he's an imposing, obnoxious male, much more dangerous in some ways than Mr. Ramsay because he's insecure. On the other hand, Lily is sexually attracted to Tansley. She flirted with him at dinner, ostensibly to help out Mrs. Ramsay, but clearly with amorous intent. A cork or a cask is bobbing in the ocean. Mrs. Ramsay can't see what it is, so she needs to try to find her spectacles. Somehow, Mrs. Ramsay's presence gives Lily Briscoe and Charles Tansley permission to be children again. They begin skipping stones at the floating object. That's a hugely important moment for the tightly wound up Lily Briscoe and she's grateful to Mrs. Ramsay for helping to make it happen. Now, Mrs. Ramsay did not really *do* anything. We know that she's very capable of doing stuff, especially interfering in the relationships of others. But all she does in this case is look for her spectacles in what was obviously a comic way. It is her genuine desire to see people happy that is instrumentally decisive, not any of the bigger nurturing roles that she plays. Underneath all the obviously definitions of Mrs. Ramsay is the missing detail – the one thing that really matters – she loves to see others happy. That's something that Charles Tansley, for all his faults, instinctively intuit about Mrs. Ramsay and the reason that he's so eager to walk her into town and carry her handbag. The real Mrs. Ramsay, when you tunnel down, is the woman who gets excited about circuses, excursions, and the little joys in life that really matter. This Mrs. Ramsay is largely invisible to others and often invisible to herself when she is performing, with great effort, her duties as wife and mother. But Mrs. Ramsay isn't the real point of artistic exploration here. The artist is always exploring himself or herself.

Recognizing the moment that matters is not enough for the modern artist. One doesn't paint a picture of Mrs. Ramsay, Charles and Lily at the beach – although some Victorian artists might have tried to do just that. Some of those sentimental paintings are for sale today for pretty hefty prices. But they are just pale mementos of fleeting moments. The artist still has to ask herself, *what is the meaning of a life lived in moments and now can you express it*. For different artists it is going to be different. Lily Briscoe paints a picture of the garden. It's not a pretty picture because it represents human relationships which, as she thinks, can often be *grotesque*. But it's not an ugly picture either, because it's a picture of the garden at the summer house and "she loves this place". It is a picture of shadows and light without clear outlines. Everything blurs into everything else. In the garden, there are empty steps, where Lily Briscoe is going to place her vision of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is an *intensely drawn line* in the middle of the blur.

What is a human life? What are human relationships? What is a person? What is a moment's joy? Life itself is a blank and empty canvas. Human relationships are always messy and sometimes grotesque. A person is a brief moment in a chaotic or at least blurry universe. What is the joy of an individual? The joy of an individual is to live your life with intensity, by your own rules rather than the rules of others. That's what it means to be an intensely drawn line.

## Gender Roles

Virginia Woolf is not only a great writer, but also a famous feminist. I've left her feminism to the end of the lecture, not only because feminism is not my area of expertise, but also because I think that Virginia Woolf's timelessness as a writer depends on her insight into the human condition more than gender relations. Nonetheless, it is through the eyes of women that Virginia Woolf explores the human condition. Her female characters, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, are much more analytically interesting than male characters like Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, William Bankes and Mr. Carmichael. In fact, despite Woolf's attempt to see him from a more objective distance at the end of the novel, Mr. Ramsay only barely escapes being the *enemy*. He's still not to be trusted. Tansley is the next generation of university trained males, who dismisses women as being unable to paint. He's a jerk, despite the acknowledgement of his extensive knowledge and leadership potential. Lily Briscoe walks out of his lecture. Virginia Woolf's dislike for authoritarian males is understandable. More puzzling is the lack of effort that she puts into more positive male characters – Bankes and Carmichael. These are obviously supposed to be high power academics – a scientist and a classics scholar cum/poet. But their most likeable characteristic in the novel is that they do no harm to women. They seem impotent but perhaps that's the only kind of man that Virginia Woolf could trust.. She obviously is obsessed with the harm that men inflict upon women.

Mrs. Ramsay ostensibly is a highly intelligent, powerful woman. Her personal spark is almost entirely extinguished, however, by the roles that she is forced to play in a male dominated society. Her energies are partly taken up by her husband's continual demands for *sympathy*

What's left are showered on her children, whose *happiness* and *protection* she sees as her responsibility. Her intermittent hatred for her husband is caused by the fact that he not only seems to shoulder no responsibility for the children but sabotages her best efforts at caring for them. The roles of wife and mother take up so much of Mrs. Ramsay's life, that she surrenders her unique individuality. Only in the late hours of night, when the children are asleep, or in intermittent moments of joy do aspects of the real Mrs. Ramsay emerge. Virginia Woolf illuminates those moments brilliantly, as when Mrs. Ramsay folds into her own solitude as symbolized by the Lighthouse stroke, or when she releases her own inner child – as when she says “let's go to the circus”. Mrs. Ramsay never translates these moments of meaning into her own life. Instead, she becomes the role that she plays. When she isn't nurturing her husband and children, she's nurturing others. And let's not forget interfering in the lives of others by being the champion of love in marriage! She can't admit that this conviction of the supreme importance of love and marriage is just an ideal that she has internalized, although she has glimmers of understanding, as when she mentally elevates the spinster Lily Briscoe over the betrothed Minta.

Therein lies the danger of the twin roles of wife and mother. They tempt Lily Briscoe but, in the end, she rejects them. With the exception of Mrs. Ramsay, all the sympathetic characters in the novel remain unmarried. What are we to make of a novel that spends so much time showing us the grotesque reality underneath the flattering image of love and marriage? If we refer to the cultural context within which the novel was written, we can identify some reasons for Virginia Woolf's attack on marriage. She wrote the novel as a goodbye, an elegy, to an imperial civilization. Central to Victorian British consciousness was a new and elevated ideal of love and marriage. To cut a very long story short, love was sentimentalized as an antidote and antithesis to a harsh, competitive, Darwinian struggle for survival. Throughout the nineteenth-century, sentimental love served as the cultural counterpoint to the *survival of the fittest*. Marriage and the home – *home sweet home* – was the place where individuals were cocooned from an ugly world. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that the survival of the fittest could ever have succeeded as a cultural ideal if the home hadn't become a refuge and a paradise.

It is the Victorian home and family that Virginia Woolf wants to target in *To the Lighthouse*. She recognizes the attraction of the image of a domestic paradise, but wants to illuminate – another metaphor for the Lighthouse – what it does to women. Around the code of love and marriage, the Victorians built an almost religious doctrine called the *separation of spheres*. A strict separation was demanded between the sexes. In terms of the marketplace, men were meant to be competitive, aggressive, success seekers whose wish was to lord it over others. In terms of culture generally, men were meant to be the adventurers, truth seekers, indomitable seekers of knowledge, wherever it was to be found. Mr. Ramsay is exactly that type of character, fearlessly charging ahead even when it was pointless. Women were meant to be the caring heart of the family, nurturing their children and providing solace or sympathy for their husbands. Moralistic



writers, mainly men but also women, were quite explicit about the fact that women needed to bury their own feelings and repress their own identity in order to become *domestic deities* or *angels of the home*. Some writers even acknowledged that women could be more intelligent and adventurous, by nature, than their husbands. But *civilization* like the modern *marketplace* absolutely required a division of labour where men played the role of conquerors and women played the role of caregivers. When Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse*, women were only just beginning to get emancipated from those roles.

That's the specific context for the novel and it explains a lot. Victorian gender roles were intensified to an extent that denied and repressed women's individuality. The classic psychological disease of the age was female *hysteria*, which psychoanalysts sought to cure, but which obviously reflected the stress placed on women to conform. We no longer live in the Victorian age, and our modern psychiatrists don't give women electric shock treatment to make them more docile and accommodating. But cultural ideas have a very long life and I suspect that many people have brought up with this idea of *separate spheres of influence* where men are expected to be tough and women are expected to be soft. Victorian culture was hardly constructed in a vacuum; almost all societies have some sort division of behavior between men and women. Victorian society was non-traditional to the extent that it based gender roles on functionality rather than human nature. Women could go to university as long as they understood their primary role as wives and mothers. The functional distinction did not, however, make gender roles any the less authoritative. Indeed, it set up a psychic dilemma, i.e. what is more important, finding your own meaning or living the meanings of others.

The paradox of modernity that is clearly illuminated with respect to gender is that there is always going to be tension between the individual and the larger society. The implication of modern individualism, and the recognition of subjectivity, that is expressed in Cowper's poem that dominates the last section of *To the Lighthouse*, is that ultimately we *perish alone*. What is the place of gender rules and roles in a modern world where we largely live subjectively and construct our own identities? Love, marriage, and family life can no longer be taken for granted. Relationships are difficult and need to be constantly negotiated between men and women. Virginia Woolf was writing at a time when gender relationships were much more constricting than they are today, but any kind of relationship based on love and sexuality is today a work in progress. Oh sure, when you are in love or when you are running on habitual auto-pilot, it is possible to ignore the difficulty. But you will not always be in love and you will not always be able to run on auto-pilot. Relationships are challenging.

The realization that no heterosexual or homosexual relationship can be authoritative for modern individuals does allow people to explore alternatives. The only way out for Mrs. Ramsay seems to be suicide or death, which is why she has a death wish at night in her solitude. But Lily Briscoe can explore alternatives because she doesn't buy into the authorized Victorian version of a relationship. We're never quite sure what her relationship is with William Bankes. She says

she *loves him* but she clearly has no intention of living with him. Her work is more important than any relationship, which makes her a certain type of modern model. Carmichael has been burned by love and he's obviously going to be a bachelor for the rest of his life. He's perfectly happy with his poetry and there is a suggestion that one of the reasons he became a great poet is because he never married again. Tansley will look for a Mrs. Ramsay to mellow his harsh and thereby perpetuate doomed relationships.

In a book written in 1927, we can hardly expect a discussion of gay relationships, although the knee hugging episode between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay may have possible homo-erotic implications. I'm not good at spotting that stuff, so I'll just throw it out there. What is explicit, however, and what is quite revolutionary is Lily Briscoe's commentary on the marriage of Paul Rayley and Minta. It sticks out in the novel like a sore thumb. Let's summarize. Despite serious doubts but under the spell of Mrs. Ramsay's ode to marriage, Paul allows himself to fall in love and propose marriage to Minta. That this marriage is a disaster comes as no surprise. The unhappiness of a man who spends his evenings playing chess while his wife has affairs, is all of a piece with Virginia Woolf's fear of relationships. Lily Briscoe feels no little satisfaction in proving that Mrs. Ramsay was grotesquely wrong in encouraging this marriage, although she can't know that the latter had misgivings about it herself. Mrs. Ramsay's intelligence was in perpetual conflict with her idealism. All that is par for the course and what we've come to expect from Virginia Woolf if we read closely.

What's a real surprise is that the relationship between the Rayleys ends up working out – as an unconventional arrangement. A lot depends on how you read the following passage. You could see it as comic if you think that Virginia Woolf could ever be funny. I don't. You could see it as ironic, were it not for the fact that the passage explicitly deals with the nature of love and marriage, from which it is unlikely that Virginia Woolf could ever be detached. Also it seems to me too detailed to an ironic commentary. Virginia Woolf would be likely to do that in brackets. But let's quote and analyze:

But to go on with their story – they had got through the dangerous stage by now. She had been staying with them last summer some time and the car broke down and Minta had to hand him his tools. He sat on the road mending the car, and it was the way she gave him the tools – business-like, straightforward, friendly – that proved it was all right now. They were 'in love' no longer; no, he had taken up with another woman, a serious woman, with her hair in a plait and a case in her hand (Minta had described her gracefully, almost admiringly), who went to meetings and shared Paul's views (they had got more and more pronounced) about the taxation of land values and a capital levy. Far from breaking up the marriage, that alliance had righted it. They were excellent friends, obviously, as he sat on the road and she handed him his tools. (189)

Love and marriage, Virginia Woolf seems to be suggesting, are two different things. You need to be able to separate them. The kind of relationship that works best in marriage is a friendship where neither party makes serious demands on the affections of others. Love seems to work best outside of marriage. An 'open' marriage is the preferred option.

Now, you don't need to buy completely into Virginia Woolf's view on love and marriage. Obviously, she lived at time when gender roles complicated and compromised loving relationships. But there is a modern message to be considered here. Individuals need to make relationship work for themselves and not try to fit themselves into conventional or stereotypical paradigms. An overly idealistic perspective on love and marriage is dangerous to the psychological health of individuals. Individuals have to find their own way that works for them. The Rayleys found their own way that worked for them – they allowed each other to have affairs and they were happy. They gave up on love, at least with each other, but they found friendship. Can you imagine Mrs. Ramsay having an affair?

### **Mrs. McNab**

I don't know if you can tell from the lectures, but I really love Virginia Woolf. I love Nietzsche too, but I find I learn more that is useful for my life from Virginia Woolf. I especially like the way she makes you think about the little details that make life meaningful. Human relationships are not Nietzsche's forte, but they make up 90% of our lives.

What disturbs me about *To the Lighthouse* is that it tells us so much about being human but ends up denying the humanity of most of the planet. I don't criticize Virginia Woolf for writing about people who have education and power over others. The fact that the Ramsays have servants, that Mrs. Ramsay sees herself as a philanthropist, that all the chatter is so very refined, polite and literary doesn't bother me much. That's Virginia Woolf's world and you have to write about the world you know. The trouble is that Virginia Woolf describes ordinary people as sub-humans. For someone who is opposed to roles, she doesn't seem to be able to deal with the working class unless she can stereotype them (for example, as fishermen). These people don't have any individuality; they don't even seem to have lives that are worth living.

There is almost palpable disdain towards Mrs. McNab and her fellows who open up the summer house at the end of the war. Mrs. McNab is "fond of flowers" but knows nothing about "books and things". (148) She shuffles from room to room like a troglodyte without any appreciation for the life that was once lived there – or the civilization that it represents – other than sharing a laugh with Mildred the cook. "Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup" is the recollection of an almost vacant mind. Her hobbling, shuffling and groaning adds a macabre element to the memory-haunted house, clearly reminiscent of the Macbeth's drunken gatekeeper, who thinks that he's in hell. If once there had been a house, a family, a civilization, it would not be remembered by the likes of Mrs. McNab. For Virginia Woolf, something more

horrible than the decay of civilization is the rise a working class of people who have nothing in their heads but a snatch of melody from the music hall. These are clearly people who are best fit for manual labour. What's the world coming to when the former servants, the Mintas, of this world won't even follow orders.

Virginia Woolf is elitist. Her idea of culture and civilization is an elite culture that relies on the subservience of a lot of people at home and abroad. Mr. Ramsay's wife and children were not the only ones forced to submit. There seems to be no appreciation, even after the debacle of World War I, for the sacrifices made by others as far as Virginia Woolf is concerned. For someone so concerned about tyranny, there is a blindness to the Mrs. McNab's of this world, the very people who are scrubbing, cleaning and refurbishing the dilapidated summer home. There is no attempt whatsoever to explore Mrs. McNab's subjectivity, presumably because for Virginia Woolf, there is nothing there of significance to explore.

But working class culture was a culture in its own right. Mrs. McNab likes to have a good laugh, because working people learned to laugh over the pain. If Virginia Woolf could learn a little about laughing from Mrs. McNab, maybe her books wouldn't be so drearily depressing. And as for those snatches of music hall songs in Mrs. McNab's mostly empty head, it would be useful to remember that it was out of music halls in England and the prison plantations and jive joints in the United States that a new and energetic culture would emerge. The Beatles were distinctly working class and owed a huge musical debt to music halls and blues musicians.

Even without this cultural contribution, elite cultures are based on the hard work of many people who don't have the same access to culture and resources as Virginia Woolf. That she can show such understanding of women like Lily Briscoe and so little of Mrs. McNab bothers me.

## Invisible Cities

### Introduction

This is the final lecture and *Invisible Cities* by Calvino is our last book. *Invisible Cities* is in most respects a departure from the idea and ideals of *modernity* that were first envisioned in the Enlightenment. However, several essential concepts, suitably modified, still remain. The most obvious is contained in the book's title – the city. This is a book that could only have been written by someone who is immersed in urban civilization. The city is a metaphor for all of modern life. Only once do we witness a non-urban resident – a goatherd – who has to pass through cities like Cecilia. He doesn't like these places “without eaves, separating one pasture from another” (152). But, whether he likes it or not, the goatherd and his goats are swallowed up by Cecilia and eventually come to recognize that “Cecilia is everywhere”. Obviously, in one sense, this is an untruth and a prejudice. Large portions of the world are non-urban and even some wilderness remains. But the statement is true for modern men and women because, for them, the city is not just a physical location. Most of what constitutes a city is *invisible*. It is an idea or an ideal of modern civilization that is inside as well as outside of us. It is an attitude and a mentality that dominates our consciousness. Arguably, even what is considered non-urban or natural is a *reaction* to the city. Would we even notice wilderness other than in contrast to the city. The city is the beating heart of modernity.

The second clearly modern concept driving the descriptions of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan is change. In the sections entitled *Continuous Cities*, *Cities and the Sky*, *Cities and the Dead*, we see inhabitants futilely attempting to fix relationships and resist change. But they only become increasingly dilapidated and ridiculous. The emphasis is on the ‘here and now’ of existence, which cannot ever be static but is always characterized either by growth or decay or, more accurately, simultaneous growth and decay. The only sky based city where it “is best to remain motionless in time” as part of an “unchanging heaven, cogs in a meticulous clockwork” is actually a place characterized by *novelty* when we examine it more closely. Andria's astrologers *self-confidently* and *prudently* change the heavens to fit every innovation in the city. *Invisible Cities* is a book that champions change and difference, even if it sometimes appears to Marco Polo that change is illusory and to Kublai Khan that there must be a pattern in the order of things that is beyond change. But try as they may neither Marco Polo nor the great Khan can escape from change in either physical or mental wandering. Kublai Khan's empire is doomed to perish like all empires before and after it.

The third modern concept that permeates *Invisible Cities* is the idea of life as continual wandering or travelling. Marco Polo is a merchant who recounts his travels to Kublai Khan. But the Marco Polo of *Invisible Cities* differs from the historical merchant-explorer in that the

travelling is recognizably mental. His imagination is never at home in any one place; he is always creating new places for himself. The real Marco-Polo was a Venetian merchant, and we see his personality explored in objects of trade. But even those objects of trade exist less as things than as symbols of a wandering experience that allow Marco Polo to continually envision new worlds. One of the characteristics that we've witnessed in modernity in this course is the notion that there is no longer any permanent *home* that a person might refer to. Marco Polo's home was Venice and he tells Kublai Khan that Venice is every city that he visits or describes. And yet, this Venetian home is only recognizable from a distance and in comparison with other cities real or imagined. There is no Venice to go home to. At best, Venice is a youthful experience or nostalgic ideal.

Modernity, especially urban life, strings out the individual's emotional equipment, often making us *nostalgic* for a simpler, purer and less complicated *past*. In an important sense, this nostalgic memory is just another function of modernity, because it only comes into existence through comparison with a modern present. Italo Calvino, the author of *Invisible Cities*, is not at all sympathetic with this nostalgia for the past. Quite the contrary; his primary orientation is always towards the future, which leads me to the fourth characteristic of modernity in *Invisible Cities*. The final two pages of the book deal with "promised lands visited in thought but not yet discovered or founded" – in other words *utopias*. Modernity invented future utopias towards which change was to be harnessed and Marco Polo clearly affirms utopian thinking:

I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. (164)

The really careful reader might be taken by surprise by Marco Polo's confession of faith in utopia. After all, most of the cities he describes are places where elegance and beauty are constantly counterpoised by gnawing corruption and decay. The palace stands on the sewer and the rubbish heap. Even the most beautiful of his cities is being destroyed from within. If you focus too much on civilization's ideals, you overlook the "crooked streets, houses that crumble one upon the other amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness". (97) It is entirely appropriate to ask -- *what on earth is going on here?* How does utopianism fit in with this expose of the "true relationship" between beautiful ideals and messy reality?

Only to a degree can Italo Calvino be considered a *modern* writer. At best, he could be called a *late modern* writer; more accurately, his approach is recognizably *postmodern*. The postmodern city, and by implication utopia, is not a place of superiority to rural or other kinds of consciousness, but an experiment in difference. In the lexicon of postmodernity, change is not positive because it leads to a better world; it simply fits in better with human beings as creatures of desire and novelty. The notion that change should lead to something *better* is inherently dangerous and imperialist. Postmodern wandering goes far beyond modern travelling and

tourism with its injunction to constantly create something *new and different*. And, as for utopianism, it is not so much a goal as a mental technique for invoking the new and exploring the different. If you don't *desire* to create heavens on earth, you will be as static as all those societies that posit a heaven hereafter.

### **Difference versus Progress**

Postmodernity differs from modernity most profoundly in its rejection of the enlightened idea of progress. The idea of improvement or progress is a modern concept that postmodernists like Calvino want to challenge on a number of fronts. In the first place, progress is only an *assumption* of a possibility that is desired. The minute one actually begins to pursue that possibility, it is "possible no longer". (33) This is not only because the distinction between one's intention and what actually happens is huge, or because one person's definition of progress is bound to come into conflict with other people's ideas. It is because, even if you could get what you want from progress, you'd discover that it wasn't really what you wanted. In the meantime, the fixation on the desired goal – for example, a higher standard of living – likely would bring about greater uniformity and unhappiness than anticipated. By 'jamming together' past, present and future, the misguided ideal of progress, limits life's possibilities by attempting to fossilize *desire*.

*The jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement: this is what you would find at the end of your journey. (99)*

The belief in progress that is modernity's alternative to the belief in God is a huge and unwarranted assumption. Some of the visible or invisible cities that Marco Polo describes may seem preferable to others, but as the sections entitled *Cities and Eyes* illuminate, everything depends upon the viewpoint of the beholder. Some of the cities described are *trading cities* but the fact that they have more wealth than other places does not make them preferable. In terms of human relationships, trading cities like Ersilia have little to recommend them. (76) People in the more capitalistic centres are like 'strangers' to each other. (53) The inhabitants' lives are so stretched and complex that they have to keep destroying themselves and starting all over. In Eutropia, the "grip of weariness" pushes the citizenry to be constantly on the move. (64) But theirs is movement without meaning. They constantly ride a *carousel of fantasies*. Of course, trading cities are not the only ones with faults; almost all the cities that Marco Polo describes have their failings. But the entire point is that there is no one ideal model, only personal preferences and fragmented possibilities.

Some modern people lament the loss of the past while more believe in progress towards the future. The *postmodern* attitude is to avoid nostalgia towards the past or misguided devotion to the future. The central strategy within this attitude is avoiding the blackmail of the past or the future in order to maximize possibilities in the present. Fragments of an ideal past or future can

be pieced together to fashion what is new and different, without being trapped by false limitations. Postmodern writers don't want to change the world in any one particular direction but they do champion change and difference. They do want to remove the barriers to freedom. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, freedom served the purpose of progress that was supposed to benefit everyone. Postmodernity is all about generating room for movement without any fixed or uniform purpose whatsoever. To the extent that modernity has a goal, its goal is to illuminate *differences* – different possibilities.

The main obstacle to difference or diversity in the past was insistence upon uniformity. The barrier to difference in contemporary life is a realistic and bureaucratic society. Modern capitalist society, for example, wants us all to conform to its limited utilitarian idea of happiness. The modern city allows room for difference only at the margins of its operations; even when it proclaims ideals like global diversity, the differences permitted are trivial. These *differences* don't make a difference. The problem lies deep within modernity itself. Societies and cities as an aggregate of people always strive for stability. To that end, the power structures of society generate rules, norms and roles that are internalized by citizens. In this way, even societies that proclaim freedom ensure conformity. *Invisible Cities* the book, and postmodernity generally, seek to liberate modern men and women by showing the range of differences that are possible, particularly if we can liberate our imaginations from the chains of reason and reality.

### **Imagination versus Realism**

Modernity's mission of progress was only made possible by its devotion to realism. Realism means the application of reason to real life, and concomitantly the suppression of imagination. Often the narrowness of modernity is blamed on the eighteenth-century movement known as the Enlightenment. But Calvino reminds us that the construction of a rational human city in general began much earlier than the enlightenment and involved extreme violence against the natural world:

with an extreme massacre, the murderous, versatile ingenuity of mankind defeated the overweening life-force of the enemy.

The city, great cemetery of the animal kingdom, was closed, aseptic, over the final buried corpses with their last fleas and their last germs. Man had finally reestablished the order of the world which he himself upset: no other living species existed to cast any doubts. (160)

This description of Theodora is not too much of an exaggeration of what modern man has done to nature. The main difference is that, in Theodora, the 'incunabula' or the destroyed species took their revenge on their overlords and "were resuming possession of the city".



The revenge of the incunabula is, of course, an imagined revenge in an imagined city. It is hardly a rational or realistic possibility. A rational or realistic approach to environmental problems, however, is limited from the start. Once you begin by thinking and speaking the language of rationalistic options, you limit the human possibilities. The romantics were the first to suggest that human life was stunted by its excessive reliance on *being realistic*, but the revolutionary potential of their embrace of the power of imagination was limited by their belief in all things human. Man and nature still mirrored each other. But Marco Polo's description of the revenge of the incunabula in Theodora imagines a non-human city:

Sphinxes, griffons, chimeras, dragons, hircocervi, harpies, hydras, unicorns, basilisks were resuming possession of their city.

In some other postmodern authors, human beings need not be trapped in their culture or civilization, just as long as they can imagine themselves as some other form of life. Postmodernism can sometimes be unsettling in its rejection of humanistic values, or in its embrace of the darker side of human nature. The entire point of describing extreme alternatives is to liberate consciousness from conventional thinking. That conventional thinking includes logic and humanist values that began in the West long before the time that we regard as distinctly modern. Letting go of those restrictive thought processes is difficult. What it implies is that there is absolutely nothing in the human experience to hold on to. You can either lament that situation or celebrate it.

The kind of reimagining that Calvino typically engages in *Invisible Cities* is not so radical or upsetting. But you can easily miss its revolutionary potential if you are not engaging in the kind of critical reading that the author expects from you. The differences between Marco Polo's real or imagined cities are meant to open you up to different possibilities, but Calvino also wants you to re-imagine and critique all your accustomed patterns of civilization. Many of the absurd practices of Marco Polo's cities are not so far removed from our own beliefs. Theodora wiped out its species and we have almost done the same. The citizens of Melania reassign roles routinely, without questioning what it is they are doing or why; don't we do that as well? (81) The citizens of the thin city of Octavio are suspended in ropes, chains and catwalks over an abyss. (75) Isn't that a metaphor for modern life and its abyss of meaninglessness? Or, if you want to be more literal, isn't that the situation of many cities built over fault lines, in reach of volcanos or tsunamis?

Calvino recommends the 'attitude' or 'mentality' of Marco Polo. He looks at cities with the eye of a traveller – from a distance. When you live for any length of time in a city, you lose your sense of perspective – the 'eye' – and you either take things for granted or you only pay attention to what chiefly concerns you in the present. What is important is to be able to re-imagine 'your' city. It is not only the perspective, but the 'mood of the beholder' that is important. Your ability to re-imagine 'your' city will be limited if you:

Walk along hanging your head, your nails dug into the palms of your hands, your gaze will be held on the ground, in the gutters, the manhole covers, the fish scales, wastepaper. (66)

You need to understand that the city is in some ways an ugly place, but if you always look down, you will never be able to see another city. Realism typically focuses on protecting from what is deemed probable rather than exploring what could be possible.

Realists typically eschew religion, but they have their own faith, i.e. that words represent things. They think that there is a 'real' city whose attributes can be described, categorized, and maximized. But every city is *really and truly* an imagined city. If you contemplate a city *from a distance* like a traveler, you will discover that it really is a complex network of signs and symbols and signals that represent other things. Only trees and stones are "what they are"; in civilization, everything means something else:

You penetrate it [the city of Tamara] along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern...Other signals warn of what is forbidden in a given place...and what is allowed. From the doors of the temples the gods' statues are seen, each portrayed with his attributes...so that the worshiper can recognize them and address his prayers correctly ...Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages, the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts. (13-14)

The city traps its 'realistic' denizens into rules and roles, that they might conceivably exploit, but does not make them any the less trapped. In the City of Olivia, Marco Polo refers to these people as 'sleepwalkers'. With his explorer's imagination, however, Marco Polo is able to glimpse another city within the dominant city where "there is always someone who bursts out laughing in the darkness, releasing the flow of jokes and sarcasm." (68) One of the characteristics that identifies postmodern writers is their embrace of 'outsiders' who don't conform to conventional realities. These provide an alternative an 'other' to the conventional wisdom. They can operate within the conventional city – we all need to be able to do that – but they don't 'buy into' it. The question you need to ask yourself is this – *do you buy into your reality more than is absolutely necessary or are you open to possibilities?* Nothing really is real.

### **Navigating a Universe of Floating Discourses**

The biggest mistake of modernity was to place too much emphasis on reality. Moderns believed that they could describe 'things' by using words. But words are not the same as things. In fact, by attempting to define and control objects with words, you could argue that we have removed

ourselves ever more from ‘things’. We late moderns live in a world where words as symbols have replaced objects and discursive networks have usurped more direct personal communication. The most obvious example of this is the increasing dominance of *virtual reality* in our lives. The great irony of the late modern period that we live in is that we cling to the *reality of things* when all our experiences show us just how illusory that is. We live in a world of texting, hypertext, linkages and reality enhancing devices but still invoke the ideal of being realistic. In the discursive or communications world that we now live in, being ‘realistic’ has to be a ridiculous ideal.

We navigate a world of communication *devices*, which only means that we live in a web of communication *networks*. The important thing used to be the *author*, but the author is no longer *authoritative*. Consider, for example, Wikipedia. Anyone can be an author. If anyone can be an author, everyone is an author. If everyone is an author, the notions of author and authority simply evaporate. There is no superior reality that an author can convey. Reality television implies that everyone’s reality is equally valid. In this increasingly postmodern world, teachers cannot hope to impart knowledge and much less values. The conventional idea of a teacher has become hopelessly old fashioned. The postmodern teacher is someone who shows students how to access information and manipulate symbols, not someone who gives you information or connects you to networks of symbols. In a postmodern world, where there is *no-thing* to hold on to, survival depends on being able to maximize the spaces between words and whatever it is that we persist in calling *things*.

Of course, this postmodern attitude can easily degenerate into thinking nothing matters, my opinion is just as good as yours, a ‘don’t worry be happy’ approach, or a conviction everyone is out for themselves. But that’s why books like *Invisible Cities* are so important. Navigating a postmodern world of overlapping and conflicting discourses is complex; it cannot be achieved by invoking simplistic slogans – that are in effect dogmatic slogans. Calvino’s cities describe how easy it is for inhabitants to get ‘trapped’ in a particular discourse and how difficult it is to find some space – some creative possibilities – within and without them. At one time, it might have been possible to find oneself comfortably *within* a particular discourse, say like the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Christianity or Islam. Even in the face of serious contradiction, these discursive frameworks could still function as ideals. But the postmodern mentality blurs the distinction between within and without, words and things, real and ideal. For a traditional Muslim or Christian, God is both real and ideal. It makes things simple. But the minute you stop believing in fixed truths, the minute you start to play with the distinctions or differences, between what is true and what is arbitrary, your reality starts to fall apart.

It’s hard to be happy in a world of floating discourses unless, of course, you are stupid. The prevalent mood of late modernity is depression. The prevalent mood of postmodernity is more melancholic than depressive. While we are less inclined to lament what has been lost and can never be meaningfully recovered, we are conscious that we are less happy than in the past. The

mood of Marco Polo and the Khan's discussions is that of melancholia – understanding that communication was simpler and happier in the past when people could put more trust in discourse. But there is no longer the possibility or even the desire of returning to the past. The past is gone except as a reservoir of possibilities but desire still remains. The Khan still clings to a permanent and ideal city – but he knows that it is only in his mind.

Human beings in the past defined themselves, and have been defined, by their values and norms. In other words, human beings were defined by discourse. When discourses are recognized to be floating descriptions rather than real definitions, what becomes of this thing called a human being? Reduced to their basic essence, human beings are either fearful or desiring organisms. In the past, communities managed fear and pursued desire with reference to a shared discourse. That is not possible in a postmodern world. Desire in the present can only overcome fear and accentuate the positive by creating something *new*. Seeking out and identifying with what is genuinely open and new – in contrast with distracting *novelties* – involves serious mood management. Marco Polo describes Zemrude as two distinct cities. The upper part is a parade of beautiful “window sills, flapping curtains, fountains”. The lower part consists of “gutters, the manhole covers, the fish scales, wastepaper” (66):

You cannot say that one aspect of the city is truer than the other, but you hear of the upper Zemrude chiefly from those who remember it, as they sink into the lower Zemrude, following every day the same stretches of street and finding again each morning the ill-humor of the day before, encrusted at the foot of the walls.

Whether a city is the site of creative possibilities or for ‘digging in the cellars’ depends largely on the “mood of the beholder”.

Optimism is a crucial postmodern attitude, but sadly, it is also rare. A great deal of postmodern literature is open and imaginative and playful, not because that is what living in a floating world of discourse feels like, and certainly not because postmodern living is easy or straightforward, but because that is the attitude that is required. But too much optimism, like too much pessimism, can also be a problem. What you really want is tension because that provides contrast and difference. The overly optimistic and the utterly pessimistic person is not the most creative.

### **Inside the Game**

Because we are all forced operate within realms of discourse, it might be thought that postmodern humans are trapped by these communication networks. There is nothing *outside* of discourse, not truth to pursue, no freedom for the individual. In fact, the very idea of an individual is meaningless if discourse conditions everything. A human being has no possibility of becoming a free and independent *subject* once one appreciates that there are no distinctive things outside of the symbols used to describe them, and this includes people. The most

powerful critique of modernity by postmodernity is that the modern individual simply does not exist. At best, a human being is a desiring machine, and more typically, a node on a discursive grid or communication network. According to one postmodern writer, there is nothing analytically significant that differentiates human beings from cyborgs. To those who find this depressing, Niklas Luhmann says *get over it*.

But whereas discourse largely conditions us, it is a characteristic of discursive frameworks that they have to change and adapt, typically becoming more complex. This effectively means that discourse is never a completely closed system. Individuality and freedom may not exist in the abstract, but there are possibilities that these things we call people can exploit to give their desires a direction. Civilizations and urban centres have always provided opportunities for differentiation, for creating something new. The problem with modern civilization is limits the options within a bureaucratic-capitalistic framework. The capitalistic-bureaucratic system superficially appears to be open and welcoming of what is new, but it operates on a highly restrictive principle – utilitarianism. The postmodern critique of utility is not merely that it fails to produce the happiness that it promises, but that it overlooks the open-endedness of human desire. If human beings could achieve happiness, they would not be happy. Happiness is not the goal, freedom to create is the goal. Even if modernity did make the world more useful, it reduced the space for imaginative desire.

Modernity sought to make the ideal real, but it completely misread the relationship between real and ideal. There is no real nor ideal. The two concepts are simply strategies for differentiating between experiences and creating new possibilities. The minute that these dueling concepts become fossilized, they lose their functionality and flexibility. That's why Marco Polo keeps repeating that you have to consider the 'ideal' or the 'real' from a 'distance'. The tension between the real and ideal have to be open to new possibilities because creation is not so much a journey from some 'here' to some 'there', but a continual assemblage of 'fragments' that are "discontinuous in space and time". (164) There is no journey's end. There is no 'mission accomplished'. To even think that way is to already fossilize experience. The only axiom of human existence is to prevent discursive closure. Then we really would be cyborgs.

Utilitarian principles, fundamentalist religion, regret in the present and nostalgia for the past are all wrongheaded impulses – at least for postmodern men and women – because they close up discourses that need to stay open. The best thing that can be said about dogmatic principles and definitive attitudes is that they make life meaningful. There must be *something* to believe, something to pursue, something to hate, something to regret. But what if there is nothing at all. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan increasingly come to an understanding that there is *nothing*, nothing at all, behind the discourses outside and inside of their heads. At times Kublai Khan thinks he is on the verge of discovering "a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords", but eventually he realizes that "no model could stand up to the comparison with the game of chess." (122)

Calvino seems to be suggesting that human life, and civilization, have no meaning. The ‘real stakes’ of life are not to be found. All the efforts to create truth, permanence, stability are analogous to a game of chess:

At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner’s hand, nothingness remains: a black square or a white one. By disembodiment of his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire’s multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes; it was reduced to a square of planed wood. (131)

Some chessboards are more aesthetic than others; some chess players are more skilled than others; some moves are more surprising. In the end, however, there is no meaning other than that of a game.

Life resembles a game of chess. It has no meaning. Its essential ingredient is *nothingness*. Everything we do will end up in “oblivion”. While you are playing the game, however, it does not occur to you that it is meaningless. Playing a complicated game like chess or life is a satisfying and serious business. Instead of *racking one’s brain* to give life an ulterior meaning, it suffices to:

Play a game according to the rules, and to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys’. (122)

If life resembles a game, then the entire point is either to play or not play the game. Playing the game implies at least trying to play it well. Playing the game well in postmodern jargon means playing creatively to win. The winning itself is not so important. In the end, nobody loses and nobody wins.

### **Stuck in the Middle With You**

In the postmodern world, there is no inside or outside of discourse or as Calvino describes it *system of forms*. We are all stuck in the middle of discourse. But we are not simply nodes in a communication network, although clearly we are partly that. As long as discursive systems are not closed, we have room to maneuver – to play the game with a variety of different moods. Of course, when you play a game in life, unlike in some forms of virtual reality, you do not play alone. In the chess game, you can watch and learn other peoples’ moves; you can respond to their moves; you can try to win the game; but to play a good game you need to play with good players. Other people are essential; other people are examples; other people provide opportunities.

If one could sum up the imperative of postmodernism in a single word it would be *difference*. Difference, tension, distinction, differentiation – these are the opportunities for creativity and growth within discursive systems. But difference is not the same thing as individualism, and certainly not the same as isolation. Kublai Khan and Marco Polo are in it together. The one is all powerful, the other merely a merchant. In today's world, the roles probably would be reversed with Marco Polo the businessman pulling the strings. But the fact that one person is an emperor while the other is a trader is not decisive here. Their occupations and incomes are largely irrelevant. What these two men recognize in one another – even before Marco Polo learns the language of the Khan – is a certain seriousness about life. Either you have to find or give a meaning to your life or, even when you are alive, you are already *nothingness*. These are both creative people but in entirely different ways. The Khan is a doer, while Marco Polo is a thinker. But they are both wrestling with the problem of bringing meaning to a life that does not provide it ready made for human beings.

Communication between people of different temperaments, not to mention different cultures, is always going to be difficult. *Invisible Cities* is clearly a tale about both urban and global civilization. Sometimes it is difficult for global citizens to talk to each other. We want different things from the conversation. What's intriguing about Marco Polo and Kublai Khan's relationship is that it addresses these issues head on. Polo points out that communication is, in a sense, always impossible because "the listener retains only the words he is expecting", and that "it is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear." (135) All the same, a sense of understanding develops between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, that no longer requires gestures or words, primarily I think because they are open and welcoming towards one another. And there is no doubt that Kublai Khan grows intellectually as a result of this relationship.

Postmodern writers are not entirely consistent in their analysis, partly because postmodernity is still partly buried within late modernity and has not yet achieved an entirely independent perspective despite some interesting experiments with game theory and cybernetics. One real weakness in postmodern theory is how relationships and communities work in a world that emphasizes *difference*. But there is something touchingly human in the relationship between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo that seems to suggest that, once we get rid of the excessive power of discursive systems, and become truly open and welcoming towards each other as vulnerable human beings, we might discover that we all have a lot in common.

Kublai Khan and Marco Polo have much more in common than human vulnerability. They are both actively searching and striving to create something, if not perfect, at least better. Against the Khan's suggestion that any city that we might try to create will end up being *infernal*, Marco Polo suggests that people who despair of creating an inferno, already inhabit an inferno even if they consider it a paradise. Those who strive for something greater -- while recognizing the difficulty, vigilance and apprehension involved in creating something new -- are invested in a common cause. The point is not to create perfection that would be a static limbo, but always to

“seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.” (165) Doing that means working with others and generating communities, however temporary these may be.

The utopian dreams of the past were imperialistic, hegemonic and ultimately oppressive because they were one society or one class’s definition of the ideal city. The Khan’s empire, however well-motivated, is an outmoded model for the postmodern world. In the world that Calvino envisions, new kinds of communities will emerge. But they will only emerge through “dialogue”:

All I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixt with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. (164)

The new postmodern issue, is how do we engage in dialogue while still respecting difference. The first heroes of the modern age, the Enlightenment, believed that communication was relatively straightforward based on logic, human rights and justice. Is that language – the language of the rational individual – suited to dialoging between different cultures? Do we need to develop new kinds of culturally neutral dialoging tools? One thing seems clear. The kind of dialogue, relationships, friendships and alliances that will create ‘space’ in the contemporary world cannot be imposed from above but need to be developed from below.