

The *Wednesday*

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Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

The Sea of Thoughts

I have been criticised for writing in my last editorial that ‘philosophy is a never-ending quest’. The critic says ‘But is it, really? Why would you say this? Do you have reasons to support the claim?’ I think this a reasonable objection and worth dwelling on. It seems to me that what the critic has in mind is that philosophy is a science of certainty, it starts with sure foundations, and it aims at a certainty of proof at the end, and has rigid rules of inference with no room for exploration. There are assumed fixed points and dogmatic results. I agree that philosophy is like that for some of the time – it is the method of philosophy which follows strict logic. But what is important is that the content of philosophy should answer new questions, venture in new directions, and explore new fields. In other words, it is the vision of the philosopher that is open for revision and development. Such development and openness are what I called the ‘never-ending quest’, courtesy of Karl Popper’s title of his memoirs. This quest is in fact not limited to philosophy but to all thought, art and poetry. It is the mark of creativity and originality.

Thoughts do not come ready made or as a finished product. If they do, they become political slogans or religious dogma. Some philosophers have an initial insight and spend the rest of their lives, refining it and making it water-tight. Others discover that the initial insight needs to be changed or developed in new directions. Plato gave a remarkable start to philosophy with his idea of the forms and spent the rest of his life revising it. By doing so, he left to posterity a field of thoughts, vocabulary, examples, methods and myths that are still with us today. Descartes altered the direction of philosophy with his novel method and proofs of the self, the external world and God. Wittgenstein is still dominating the philosophical scene with his linguistic turn and novel way of doing philosophy. His thoughts were always on the move, and it is customary to talk about his work as an early and a late Wittgenstein. He abandoned himself to philosophising, and the power of his philosophy is that it is open for revision and renewal. Perhaps this is what

brought him so many followers and so much influence for such a long time. We find similar examples in the development of Schelling’s thought, Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s, to name just a few.

Changes in individual philosophical minds may lead to a whole shift in the thought of a period. Normally, this happens when there is a sense of crisis in philosophical thinking, but this is a rare moment in history. Lenin once said that ‘there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen’. Applied to philosophy, we find that there are long spans of time where philosophical thought becomes standardised, finished and stagnant. The little variations do not alter the fact that philosophy is not moving forward. But then a philosopher comes like a bolt of lightning with an idea that changes philosophy and opens the door for a new way of thinking, and brings with him or her a new vocabulary and a new method of doing philosophy. Nietzsche called himself a genius and dynamite. It is a very apt metaphor. The shift from Hegelianism to analytical philosophy, starting with Russell and Moore in the English-speaking world, is one example, as is the move about the same time from Kant and Hegel to Phenomenology and Hermeneutics on the continent.

Philosophers, just like poets and artists, go back to the thoughts that they have generated and look at them in a new light, or subject them to rigorous criticism, altering their form or content, and they may make a drastic change leading to the abandonment of such thoughts. But something stays: it is the initial vision that can be traced throughout their work. I could go further and say it is to do with their character. There are always different ways of reading the work of philosophers, but I find that in most cases there is an underlining continuity in the thought that reflects their frame of mind. It is between continuity and change that philosophers, poets and artists weave their works.

The Editor

SAVING THE APPEARANCES

Barfield's stimulus for writing *Saving the Appearances* was an encounter with 'literalness' and his attempt at unraveling the idolatry inherent in literalism resulted in a complex text where finally the universality of the 'I' wins through in its role in interpreting the world.

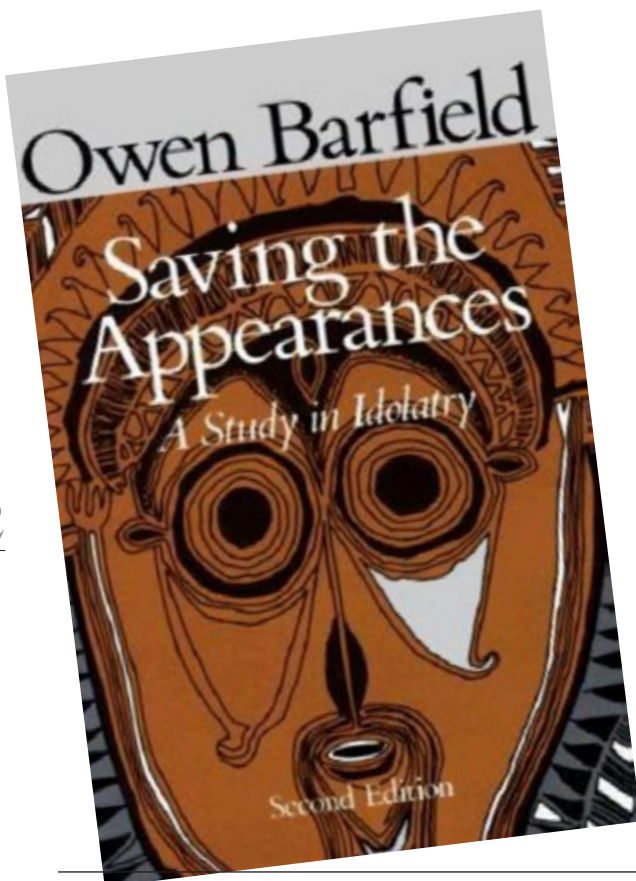
WILLIAM BISHOP

Owen Barfield's classic book, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, was first published by Faber & Faber in 1957 and in paperback in 1965 in North America, where it steadily gained an appreciative audience. It demands careful study because some readers thought Barfield was proposing a complete metaphysical theory of the nature of reality. On the contrary, he draws attention to evolution of consciousness, which has far-reaching consequences. 'Saving the appearances' was an expression applied in astronomy to a hypothesis to explain otherwise inexplicable movements of bodies in the heavens. Used here it suggests the difficulty in explaining meaning hidden in today's appearances and the need to save this.

Barfield says that 'our immediate awareness of nature is a system of 'representations' of something of which we are not immediately aware, but to which our representations are correlative.' That sounds cryptic, and what is said in *Saving the Appearances* often sounds counter-intuitive, when understood from our own point in historical time where nature seems entirely independent from us. While Plato thought that it is through perception that we share or participate in the process of coming into being, so for Barfield taking appearances literally as phenomena, unaware of the mind's participation, was idolatry. Science accepts the difference between the structure of matter and the appearances presented by that structure to normal human consciousness, and many philosophers since Kant have emphasized the participation of mind in the creation of appearances.

According to Barfield humanity and nature exist in an evolving interdependent relationship. Initially mind is embedded in nature: a union of consciousness and nature called 'original participation'. Then the life-principle of polarization begins to separate mind from nature, facilitating the development of self-consciousness and memory, at which point thinking about the *representation* of nature occurs. Barfield calls this *alpha thinking*. Later, extreme polarity severs the sense of participation, causing Mind and Nature to seem entirely separate. Here reflective thinking about the nature of the collective representations and their relation to the mind (*beta thinking*) aids *final participation*, which involves awareness of the status of the representation and use of the will to make a deliberate act of imagination to see phenomena as participated.

Barfield accepts an external objective reality ('reality insofar as it is independent of our direct awareness of it'). This is the *unrepresented*. The senses engage with this unrepresented base ('particles'), configuring this in the mind by utilizing primary Imagination (the faculty for making images). Barfield calls this *figuration*. This configured image is an internal *representation*





Owen Barfield



Goethe

of an external phenomenon (a mental image). As a representation (an image) it contributes to the *collective representations* of a culture, allowing common communication. Participation is the extra-sensory (sub-conscious) relation between the human mind and the unrepresented. Since the mind contributes in large part to the representation so the correlative, the represented, is found within ourselves.

Two examples illustrate the role played by the percipient's *participation* and imagination: a rainbow as a *representation* that depends on water droplets, sunlight, eyesight and figuration; and the representation of a tree, which depends upon particles, light, eyesight and figuration. Both rainbow and tree are *appearances* and yet one is entirely mental and would not exist without the viewer, while the other seems to have existence independent of the viewer. Interestingly the 'primitive' experiences the representations to be outside and of the same nature as their own self (as alive and of a psychic and will nature). The 'primitive' may have similar eyes to ours but they have a different mind (pre-logical), hence a different *figuration*, leading to different 'collective representations'.

Imagination

In its creative role with *form* imagination contributes meaning. In order to stress the importance of imagination, Barfield references Coleridge's description of Imagination where the limited human mind (the finite mind) in exercising the Imagination repeats and recapitulates what the unconstrained divine mind (the infinite 'I Am') is eternally engaged in by creating and sustaining the universe, which would not be there if God did not imagine it and continue to imagine it, for the imagination is what the mind does when it functions at all, and it does so by virtue of participation in the Logos – in other words by the grace of God.

The familiar world is a world of representations so to take them literally as objects is a form of idolatry. The ancient Hebrew nation was warned against idolatry (projecting divinity into an object) and an idol was thought to be hollow and those who revered idols became hollow like them. At that time the ancient Hebrew nation was surrounded by idolatry. According to Barfield the commandment forbidding the Hebrews to make graven images was intended to help them to emerge from *original participation* in order to pioneer a non-representational (non-image) consciousness that

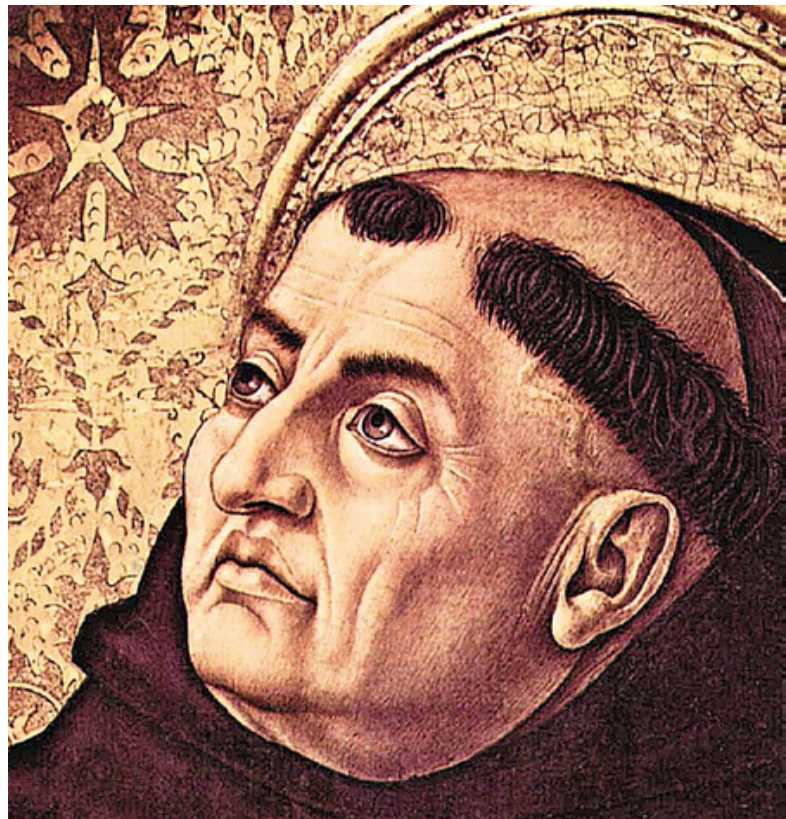
Philosophy

would prioritize inwardness. The name of God (I AM) spoken to Moses is etymologically related to the verb 'to be' and associated with breath. The 'I AM' implies participation between Source and self: that name, 'I AM' – is participated by 'every being with eyes that see and ears that hear and that speak through the throat'. But it is incommunicable because its participation by a particular self uttering it is an inseparable part of its meaning. No human being can call another outer being 'I'.

Barfield remarks that Semitic languages, such as Hebrew, emphasize the unity of meaning and sound (even in the consonants), while Aryan languages, such as Greek, emphasize meaning. So when Hebrew met Greek in Alexandria, during the *null point* in the *evolution of consciousness*, the Greek word 'logos' was enriched with the sense of the *being* of Word). When spoken, according to Barfield, the original unity of the *inner* word is polarized into outer and inner, of sound and meaning, so that when Man himself was 'uttered' (created) the cosmic wisdom became polarized in and through him, into the duality of appearance and intelligence, representation and consciousness.

The whole basis of epistemology from Aristotle to Aquinas assumed participation of the mind with phenomena, and this persistence of participation explains why the medieval world was so different from our own. It was perceived as a theophany, as evidenced by the collective representations. Representations were taken both literally and symbolically, so Hell was depicted physically but was meant symbolically to indicate spiritual suffering, and depiction of angels indicated a spiritual presence (or being). Where participation persisted, literal interpretation was impossible, because the collective representations were not yet idols. Space was also conceived differently. A person felt their self to be a central organic microcosm within a connected macrocosm. It was during the 17th century that space became an idol (hollowed out) where space was seen as the absence of phenomena, conceived in the phenomenal mode. This is when spatial *perspective* replaced participation.

The Romantic Movement maintained a link to the Spirit of Nature differently from original participation: nature entered the human being so that Nature became the representation of Man. As Coleridge wrote in his Dejection Ode: '*We receive but what we give / And in our life alone does Nature live*'. So when Nature is the artist or poet's representation it is not idiosyncratic, but will have an order to it because Nature is 'a system of representations', and the artist or poet (with metaphor)



Thomas Aquinas

stands in a 'directionally creative' relationship to Nature similar to God (as Creator) with the creative Word. This does not involve the individual's finite personality but the Divine Name in the depths behind the artist and poet. Interestingly the Impressionists are said to have painted Nature as a representation of Man in their attempt to consciously experience the normally unconscious activity of figuration itself.

Separation between mind and nature reached its culmination in the 19th century when phenomena were experienced as completely separate from the observer. Then in the 20th century when models of the increasingly complex 'external' world could no longer be visualized and atomic physics implicated the observer in the phenomena, mathematics (in its 'inward' non-representational role) became prominent in science. Then with the rise of psychoanalysis with its 'collective unconscious', the Aristotelian concepts of *potential* and *actual being*, which had over time been drained of meaning, gained new relevance; but a similar recognition was not granted to a 'collective conscious' (with its collective representations). *Potential* becoming *actual* is reflected in the *unrepresented* becoming a *representation* in the conscious mind: 'the phenomenal world arises from the relation between a conscious and an unconscious and evolution is the story of the changes

that relation has undergone and is undergoing’

Final Participation

Physical science postulates an unrepresented (‘particles’) independent of consciousness, but the existence of appearances depends upon the mind’s participation. It is from our sensual response to the unrepresented that figuration and thinking construct the phenomenal world. To make sense of something is literally to transform the unrepresented into sensation. Unfortunately ‘evolution of consciousness’ is omitted from the standard theory of biological evolution, which recognizes only a static relationship between human consciousness and nature. In spite of this Barfield sees a positive aspect to the idolatry of the post-medieval world in that science has cleaned the appearances of any trace of Spirit, thereby freeing humanity from ‘original participation’ in preparation for ‘final participation’.

The development of self-consciousness enables images to be detached from phenomena, and then as liberated images (within memory) they are at a person’s disposal, allowing the poet to use metaphor to signify (or name) a new meaning. This, according to Barfield, is analogous to Divine creation by the Word. ‘But if I think of God as other in the same mode as the phenomena then I substitute an idol for God, while the opposite pole to Man’s otherness from the “I AM” is his supreme identity with it’. The progressive loss of original participation meant either ever-increasing inwardness of the Divine Name and Divine Presence (which is the religious aspect of ‘final participation’) or ever-increasing idolatry, in religion and elsewhere.

The Kingdom

Original participation (the unconscious identity of Man with his Creator) decreased as the Spirit moved from Nature toward Mind. This facilitated inwardness and change in the direction of human consciousness. The development of self-consciousness as I-consciousness is crucial to inwardness. According to Barfield inwardness of the Divine Name was realized in Jesus, yet at that time in history any inwardness cultivated by the Hebrews had lapsed to the point where the dominant Pharisee sect regarded their God as external in an existentially parallel way that man was seen. At this null point in evolution of consciousness, ‘participation’ had deprived the outer kingdom of appearances of meaningful spiritual substance, but the new Inward kingdom had not yet begun to be realized. It was at this point that Divinity entered into Man in the form of the Incarnation of Christ as God in Jesus the Man. Here Christ ‘is the *cosmic wisdom* on its way from original to final participation’.

The mystery that Jesus reveals in parables is an inward ‘kingdom’. In the parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word sown within as the Logos. From then onwards the life of the image is to be drawn from within. It was because ‘final participation’ had not been achieved by the nation intended to achieve it for humanity that the torch passed to those with a pictorial consciousness, namely the Greeks and Romans. The apostle Paul (with his Hebrew heritage) preached in Athens to Greeks concerning their ‘Unknown God’, to which they maintained an altar. The apostle Paul spoke of a being (or Being) ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’. This was the concrete experience of inwardness where the ‘I’ participates the ‘I AM’.

According to Barfield, Thomas Aquinas was capable of final participation. He was able to hold in tension the non-representational religious consciousness and the representational consciousness derived from Greece and Rome. And Goethe is cited as maintaining participation that allowed him to unite voluntary creativity with the necessary demand of passive receptivity. His ‘ur-phenomenon’ (the archetypal plant in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*) is *potential* rather than *actual*. For Barfield the life of the image is none other than the life of imagination, and iconoclasm (breaking of images) ‘is made possible by the seed of the Word stirring within us, as imagination’. To understand this, according to Barfield, requires some acquaintance with final participation, or with parabolic utterance. ‘To be able to experience representations as idols and then to be able to perform the act of figuration consciously, so as to experience them as participated, this is imagination.’ The extremity of idolatry to which we are moving renders attainment of this dual relation to nature absolutely vital and necessary for art and science.

Barfield also discerns a connection between imagination and morality, linking this to the heart not yet hardened by literalism (idolatry); for Imagination, with its role in figuration, can be applied for good or ill, so that the systematic use of imagination will be required in the future, not only for the increase of knowledge, but for saving the appearances from chaos and inanity. Also since the phenomenal world is not independent of human volition and ‘*soul is in a sense all things*’, the idols we create become built into the souls of our children who come to think of themselves as objects becoming increasingly hollow. Far-reaching consequences follow from our collective representations, both for meaning and human destiny. For Barfield, *God’s view is the view of Mind as such*. God bends the rainbow through the human eye.

What is Superstition?

RUUD SCHUURMAN

I consider myself to be a philosopher, in the literal sense of the word: a lover of wisdom. ‘Wisdom’ literally means ‘state of knowing’ (from Old German *wizzan*, ‘knowing’, and *-tum*, ‘state’), which is what I take it to mean. The opposite of wisdom (i.e., knowing) is ignorance (i.e., not-knowing). Superstition seems to be a special case of ignorance and a particular nasty obstacle to knowing. As Bob Ingersoll put it: ‘Superstition is, always has been, and forever will be, the foe of progress, the enemy of education and the assassin of freedom’.

We touched upon the notion of ‘superstition’ in earlier earlier Wednesday meetings, but only coincidentally. In the Wednesday meeting of 17 July 2024, we started looking into it more seriously: What is superstition? And what is not?

Superstition and Religion

Dictionaries tend to define superstition as ‘belief in and reverence for the supernatural’. But such definitions fail to tell us what superstition is. They just give an example of what many take to be a case of superstition. To put it more formally: dictionaries tend to define superstition extensionally, by what it refers to, or ostensibly, by giving an example, rather than intensionally, that is, qualitatively, by specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for superstition.

According to such definitions, religion (i.e., the belief in one or more supernatural Gods) would qualify as superstition. But does it? I do not think so. To quote Charles Lindbergh: ‘Science intensifies religious truth by cleansing it of ignorance and superstition’. And to quote Spinoza: ‘I make this chief distinction between religion and superstition, that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on knowledge’.

The belief in God need not qualify as superstition. But it depends on what we mean by ‘God’ and what we take to be the ‘valid means of knowledge’. To give an example: If we take testimony (i.e., scripture, e.g., the Bible) to be a valid means of knowledge, then God is (i.e., wants to be called and known as) ‘I am

that I am’. That is, if we trust Moses’ testimony, as transmitted to us in Exodus 3:14, we can know that God exists. After all: If God is that I am that I am, and I am that I am that I am, and I exist, then God exists. Of course, we may not accept this as proof of God’s existence. For example, because we consider the testimony (i.e., the Bible) to be unreliable or because we think it is an incorrect translation of the Hebrew text.

The very notion of ‘means of knowledge’ is not very common in philosophy. Perhaps it is a Hindu notion (*pramanas*). Academic philosophers may cover it when they talk about ‘grounding’ or perhaps it is an integral part of theories of truth or knowledge. Either way testimony is just one possible means of knowledge. Others include perception (‘evidence’), revelation (in the form of scripture or in the form of the universe), inference (e.g., accepted principles or ‘laws’ of reason), authority (e.g., of experts, state, or church), analogy (e.g., comparison), intuition, imagination, or conceivability. Someone suggested that whether an idea is helpful or unhelpful may be a valid criterion.

Superstition and Science

While religion is typically taken to be a kind of superstition, science is typically taken to be the cure against superstition. As Thomas Huxley put it: ‘The birth of science was the death of superstition’. We can see why he might say this. Much that was attributed to God—thunder and lightning, weather and health, the power that keeps celestial bodies moving in the right ways and not fall on us—is now accounted for by scientific theories. But not everybody agrees. As Garrett Fort put it: ‘Superstition? Who can define the boundary line between the superstition of yesterday and the scientific fact of tomorrow?’ Again, we can see why he might say this. For example, we believed that the sun orbited the earth (and even believed that Mars made a ‘retrograde motion’). In hindsight, it seems silly. But was it superstition? And is the fact that science had it all wrong back then a reason to suspect that science also has it wrong now?



Hoping for the best

Perhaps we should start with some simpler and clearer examples. Although I did not argue for it, I will assume that superstition is a property of beliefs.

Examples of Superstition

Here are some beliefs that do seem to qualify as superstition:

Believing that (doing) certain things will prevent bad luck, e.g.: touching or knocking on wood, not stepping on cracks, not using number 13 or 4 (in China).

Believing that (doing) things will make a wish come true, e.g.: crossing your fingers, throwing a coin in a fountain or well.

Believing that (doing) certain things will bring good luck: throwing salt over your shoulder, carrying a lucky penny around.

Believing that (doing) certain things will bring bad luck: black cat crossing, walking under a ladder.

We may speculate about the origins of such beliefs. And in some cases, there may be good reasons for holding the belief, in which case it would not longer qualify as superstition. Someone suggested that there are good reasons for not walking under a ladder: things may fall down from whatever is up there or the ladder itself may come down. If so, the belief that it is better to avoid walking under a ladder is not superstition. However, the belief that walking under a ladder causes bad luck in the future may still be.

There are also cases that are not clear-cut. For example: Phobias. OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). Belief in blame (i.e., believing to know what is good and what is evil). Fear of death (as Socrates argued in his apology, according to Plato). Belief in free will (i.e., that you can will what you will). Belief in the existence of things outside of consciousness, e.g.: things-in-themselves, e.g., the external world, other consciousnesses, God. Belief that morality is objective. Belief that truth is objective. Belief that reality is objective.

Finally, there are some cases that are typically taken to be superstition but that are not. For example:

- Belief in divination / astrology. While much of it may be mere superstition, not all of it is. For example, we can accurately predict tides, sunrise-sunset, and seasons based on planets and stars. Perhaps the line between astronomy and astrology is not as clear-cut as it seems?
- Believing to be a human being or person. I guess you will readily agree that this is not superstition. But probably for different reasons. I guess you believe that it is not superstition because it is a rational belief (i.e., true knowledge, supported by reason). While I believe it is not superstition it is an irrational belief (i.e., false, contradicted by reason).

There is more discussion to come in the near future. Please feel free to comment on this article directly to ruud.schuurman@linea-recta.com.

Obituary

Farewell Dear Friend Erica Warburton (1939 - 2024)

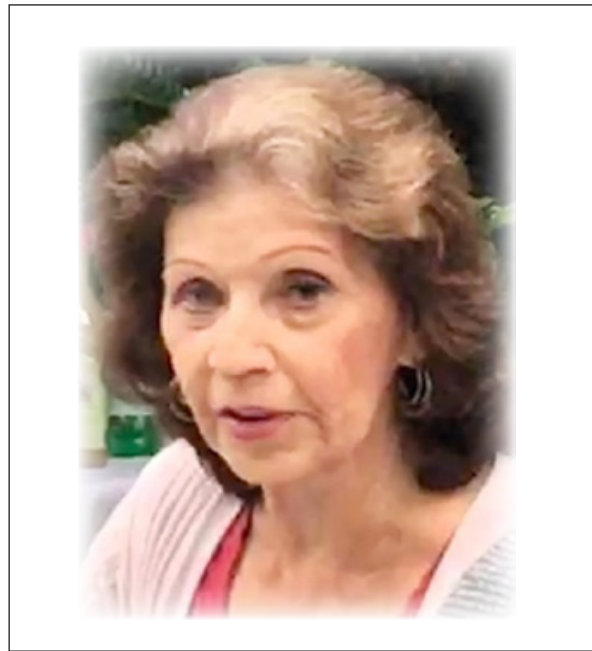
RAHIM HASSAN

It is with great sadness that I announce to *The Wednesday's* readers the passing of our poet and a great supporter Erica Warburton. She died 25th June 2024, after we finished designing the last issue of the magazine. Erica was a poet, a painter, a musician, a mathematician and a philosopher. I must have known her for twenty-two years at the monthly Friday Philosophy Society meetings at Rewley House, Oxford, known as PhilSoc. She was a regular attendant, although it meant travelling from Reading. She always participated with witty comments and fine philosophical arguments. Erica was always very kind to me and very supportive, and more so when I started publishing *The Wednesday*. She contributed very personal poems. In total, she published 27 poems, stretching from issue 15 to issue 163. She always promised to send more after going through her papers, but she did not manage to, because of health problems and a move from Reading to Dorchester in Dorset. Erica's poems reflect a mix of nostalgia for India and of her experience of racism in London schools.

From the biographical information kindly supplied by her son Richard, I came to know that Erica was born in 1939 in Lucknow, India, into a community of Anglo Indians. Both her father and grandfather had looked after the family auctioneer business. Her father's name was Eric, and they shared the same birthday, hence Erica being given that name. In 1950, the entire family travelled by boat to England. The Hashmans settled in Cricklewood, North London. But the move did not delete the memory of her childhood India. Her poems reflect this clearly.

In London, she was expected to study mathematics at Oxford or Cambridge but in her last years at school her interest in music grew through her own participation in choirs, and the enthusiasm of her school music teacher. She went on to study singing at the Guildhall School of Music. After graduation, Erica married John Warburton in 1960 and had three children Karen, David and Richard.

Erica was active in many fields. She regularly attended church, took many adult education courses in the arts, and took an active role in discussion groups, on philosophy, religion, art, and literature, making some lasting friendships. She taught music and maths, but she gave up teaching five years ago. After a fall three years ago, in which she sustained a serious head injury, her memory took a more serious turn for the worse, but she continued to find much joy in her intellectual pursuits, and her faith. She always turned towards faith in difficult times. When her daughter was diagnosed with lung cancer, she asked me to pray for her. She knew that I have faith. I prayed for her until her sad death in 2014. I kept praying for Erica when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer until her final day.



Erica Warburton

My memory of Erica is of her regular messages responding to sending her each issue of *The Wednesday*. She always replied with very witty phrases that gave me encouragement and made me happy: 'You're a miracle worker!', 'Thank you kind sir!', 'Gosh, you're an amazing man!', 'I've no idea how you magic the whole of this together...', 'Oh, splendid!', '... your magazine is a special joy to which I look forward', but nothing made me as happy as the following e-mail: 'Dear Rahim, It was a joy to pray for you, your work, and your magazine last night.

I look forward to the beauty of so doing on and on.... With warmest regards, Erica'.

I will certainly miss her and these lovely messages.

Before the Covid restriction, Erica took part in the first and the second anniversary celebrations of *The Wednesday*. She read her poems to the group in these celebrations, and everyone enjoyed talking to her. She was much loved and remarkable lady.

Erica was buried at St. Peter's Church, Wootton, Oxfordshire 25th July 2024. She is survived by her two sons.

Erica published the following poems, with the issue number in bracket:

A Child at Partition (15), Late Monsoon (26), Royal Albert Hall and Self Portrait (42), Chorus (54), Christ Church School Report (57), Where the Banyan Tree Lean (60), Changed Circumstances (67), Moonshine (68), Epilogue (100), Soldier (106), Dark (110), Semantics (116), On the Return to Oneself (117), Morning (118), Sutra (120), Child Technology (122), Masterpiece (124), Sutton Boys (135), Say 'Corking' Miss (136), A Handsome Dad (137), A Baptism in Lucknow (142), The British Garrison Church (146), Songbird (158), In the Gym (159), Mother (160) and The Library (163).

You can read all these poems on our website:

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Rahim Hassan



On the Return to Oneself

**If I stay alone, my eye single,
illuminated by the pages of the good
and the great, that bright community
at the gate or travelling inside me,**

**if I treasure up my middle-age -
it is a grace, that measured length of air
I sharpen in the singing blades of moon -
to tune my ear with memory,**

**if I keep time personalised,
baggy, loose, free to be energised by any
lucky notion, gobbet, wormhole, passion,
like Blake's joy, kissed as it flies,**

**if I keep playing pen and brush -
chance habits of mind, habits of mine;
I think dissonance would stay distant,
a slight fiction, a rumour only.**

Erica Warburton

The Silurian Hypothesis: A Theoretical Exploration of Pre-Human Industrial Civilization

Dr. ALAN XUEREB

‘Before we invented civilization our ancestors lived mainly in the open out under the sky. Before we devised artificial lights and atmospheric pollution and modern forms of nocturnal entertainment we watched the stars. There were practical calendar reasons of course but there was more to it than that. Even today the most jaded city dweller can be unexpectedly moved upon encountering a clear night sky studded with thousands of twinkling stars. When it happens to me after all these years it still takes my breath away’.

- Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*

The quote I chose from Carl Sagan is one of my favourites. Imagine what our cave dwelling ancestors thought about the starry night. Now imagine, *a contrario sensu*, that they were more evolved than we think, and perhaps blew themselves up millions of years ago. An extinction level event, brought unto ourselves. This is what the so-called ‘Silurian Hypothesis’ is all about.

First articulated by scientists Adam Frank and Gavin Schmidt in 2018, the Silurian Hypothesis challenges conventional notions about the uniqueness of human civilization. It suggests that advanced, non-human civilizations could have arisen and fallen in Earth’s distant past, leaving behind scant evidence due to the vast time scales involved. This hypothesis draws its name from the Silurian period, approximately 443 to 419 million years ago, though it is not confined to this era. The authors named the hypothesis after a 1970 episode of the British science fiction TV series Doctor Who where a long buried race of intelligent reptiles ‘Silurians’ are awakened by an experimental nuclear reactor. In this paper the authors are not however suggesting that intelligent reptiles actually existed in the Silurian age, nor that experimental nuclear physics is liable to wake them from hibernation.

I will immediately quote from the conclusion of this paper to put to rest those of us whose hearts are with the sceptics. The authors explain:

‘While we strongly doubt that any previous industrial civilization existed before our own, asking the question in a formal way that articulates explicitly what evidence for such a civilization might look like raises its own



“Terra” – 60x80 cms oil on canvas (2024)

useful questions related both to astrobiology and to Anthropocene studies’.

Having said that, scientists and philosophers alike should never exclude any possibility before they actually have any tangible evidence against it. Even in the latter case, one may explore that impossible possibility which may (or may not) lead to some discovery. I am absolutely sure that the ancient Greeks considered mere fantasy any conjecture of a flying tube capable of going to the moon.

Geological Evidence and Detection Challenges

Detecting evidence of pre-human industrial civilizations is inherently challenging due to the dynamic nature of Earth’s crust. Tectonic activity, erosion, and sedimentation continually recycle surface materials,

potentially obliterating signs of ancient civilizations. Traditional archaeological methods are insufficient for this task, necessitating a multidisciplinary approach combining geology, paleoclimatology, and geochemistry.

Key indicators might include anomalous concentrations of certain isotopes, synthetic materials resistant to degradation, and unusual sedimentary patterns. However, distinguishing such signals from natural processes and recent anthropogenic contamination requires careful analysis. For instance, elevated levels of carbon isotopes or trace elements like plutonium in ancient strata could hint at industrial activity but must be contextualized within natural background levels and geochemical cycles.

Heideggerian Perspective on the Silurian Hypothesis

The potential existence (as improbable as it is) of pre-human civilizations on Earth can be enriched through the philosophical lens of Martin Heidegger, particularly his concepts of *Dasein* (being-there) and *Geschick* (one of the meanings is destiny). Heidegger's exploration of being and technology offers a profound framework for considering the existential implications of the Silurian Hypothesis.

Heidegger posited that technology is not merely a collection of tools but a mode of revealing the world, a perspective that aligns with the transformative impact industrial civilizations have on their environment. If previous civilizations existed, their technological engagement with the world would have shaped their destiny and left imprints, however subtle, on the geological record. This view emphasizes the temporal and finite nature of human existence, urging a reflection on how contemporary civilization engages with technology and its long-term consequences.

The Fermi Paradox and the Silurian Hypothesis

The Fermi Paradox - the apparent contradiction between the high probability of extraterrestrial civilizations and the lack of evidence for, or contact with, such civilizations - provides an intriguing context for the Silurian Hypothesis. If advanced civilizations could arise and disappear without leaving conspicuous traces, it might explain why we have not detected extraterrestrial civilizations despite the vast number of potentially habitable planets.

The Silurian Hypothesis suggests that advanced civilizations may not leave lasting or easily detectable evidence. This aligns with the notion that extraterrestrial civilizations could undergo similar cycles of rise and fall, leaving behind only subtle markers that are difficult

to distinguish from natural processes. Therefore, the absence of clear evidence for extraterrestrial civilizations does not necessarily imply their nonexistence but rather points to the challenges in detecting such civilizations over astronomical timescales.

Implications for Planetary Habitability

The Silurian Hypothesis extends beyond Earth, offering insights into the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). If advanced civilizations could arise and disappear without leaving conspicuous traces, it raises the possibility that exoplanets might host or have hosted similar civilizations. Consequently, SETI efforts might need to focus on subtle, indirect evidence of past industrial activity rather than overt technological signals.

Societal and Philosophical Considerations

The potential existence of pre-human civilizations on Earth prompts profound questions about the longevity and impact of technological societies. It challenges anthropocentric views and encourages a deeper reflection on the sustainability of human civilization. Heidegger's critique of technology and his emphasis on the authentic engagement with Being highlight the need for sustainable practices to ensure long-term survival. If industrial societies can arise independently, their repeated emergence and collapse could be a common cosmic phenomenon, implying a need for a fundamental re-evaluation of our technological trajectory and its alignment with a more authentic mode of existence.

Conclusion

The Silurian Hypothesis, while speculative, invites a re-examination of Earth's geological record through a novel lens. It underscores the importance of interdisciplinary research in unravelling the complexities of our planet's history and highlights the broader implications for understanding the persistence and detectability of advanced civilizations. Integrating Heidegger's philosophical insights offers a deeper existential context, while considering the Fermi Paradox provides a cosmological perspective on the potential frequency and detectability of technological civilizations. Whether or not definitive evidence of pre-human industrial civilizations is found, the hypothesis enriches our perspective on planetary evolution and the potential for technological life elsewhere in the universe. I also had a lot of fun thinking and writing about this!!!

I conclude this piece with another of Carl Sagan's aphorisms, this time from his novel *Contact* - by far my favourite novel and movie:

'In the long run, the aggressive civilizations destroy themselves, almost always. It is their nature'.

You closed the door

(Villanelle)

You closed the door, and all the lights went dead.
I opened it again and saw the sun.
I think, by then, you ran within my head.

The wind collected all my dreams in red
and blew them off, with laughter and with fun.
You closed the door, and all the lights went dead.

I saw you in my dream, arriving late.
You took me quickly, shot me with your gun.
I think, by then, you ran within my head.

The devils and the angels let me wait
until you finished and your work was done.
You closed the door, and all the lights went dead

I hoped you'd stay, keeping the words you said.
But I grew old, now I remember none
I think by then you ran within my head.

I would have liked a lover's touch instead,
someone who stayed, no longer on the run.
You closed the door, and all the lights went dead.
I think, by then, you ran within my head.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*



The Mediated Vision (or living in the secondary)

[One] way of assuaging visual desire was writing about it. My first attempt at theory, in *The Unmediated Vision*, argued that poetry, especially in the modern period from Wordsworth to Valéry, pitted the other senses, primarily the ear, against the eye by a compensatory dialectic. ‘Pure Representation’, the chapter tracing how symbolic process undoes visual dominance, subverts ‘O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon’, the blinded Samson’s cry in Milton’s poem. The verse is made to express my own anguish: at excess of sight, of seeing without understanding, and feeling the guilt of a voyeur for not giving back, through some sort of recreative mimesis, the sheer, early delight of sense-experience.

Perhaps I turned to writing about reading because I was deprived in younger days of the simultaneously sensuous and intellectual shock great paintings give.

Geoffrey Hartman, ‘A Life of Learning’

1

I am much taken with what experts say
Of art, since short of expertise myself;
It’s for the mixed-mode cues their books convey
That poets and art-critics share my shelf.

Place me in front of some great work and ask,
Quite simply, ‘what d’you make of it?’, and I’ll
Say things to prove myself up to the task
Since couched in passable art-critic style.

For, truth to tell, my visual cortex seems
To lack what’s made up for, I half-believe,
By a rehearsed response that part-redeems
My having such poor fallbacks up my sleeve.

‘Cerebral dominance’, left-right perhaps,
Or neural paths bicameral, cross-linked,
That might just balance gifts and handicaps:
The epic muse sang best when Homer winked!

Yet how explain this curious need of mine
For words, text, sharp-eyed commentary, the sort
Of writing that allows me to assign,
When – charitably put – ‘teased out of thought’

By some reputed masterwork, a first
Approximation to what meets the high
Requirements placed on me by those well-versed
In all that once escaped my clueless eye.



CHRIS NORRIS



The muses

2

And yet that's not quite it, that panic need
For something, anything, to help restore
Their nerve that has museum-goers read
Whatever lets them feel they know the score.

With me it's having language intervene,
Or intercede, perhaps, or play the role
Of that – for some – straightforward link between
The work, their viewing it, and then the whole –

To me – mysterious process by whose grace
Those art-historians, critics, connoisseurs,
And expert types so readily touch base
With what the work so pickily confers.

'A picture's worth a thousand words', it goes,
The puff put out by Art Promotions Inc,
Though it's the challenged viewer who best knows
How rare the gift held out by that spilled ink.

It's word and image artfully combined,
The commentary so angled as to bring
Them out, those aspects I could never find
By any stretch of eye-led prospecting

Or plain reliance, as the guides now teach,
On careful looking and a mind kept clear
Of preconceptions so the thing can reach
You unencumbered by some false idea.

Maybe it works for some, those amply blest
With visionary powers, or sometimes cursed –
I half-suspect – with having long suppressed
What they might offer when thought-processed first.

With music too, the 'innocent ear's a myth
Most popular with those who think it wrong
Should we, at bar one, not have leave forthwith
To treat a symphony like a simple song,

Retain no memories of the piece beyond
A few bars back, no expectations set
By previous hearings, and no closer bond
Between successive phrases than may let

The listener piece odd bits together, much
As it, the 'innocent eye', may have its 'View
Of Delft' and yet, thus hamstrung, vainly clutch
For guidance at the crassest sorts of clue.

No painting, symphony, or – not to raise
Suspicious brows – no poem but entails
Our constant sounding-out of all the ways
Thought leaps to aid where plain perception fails,

Or some new-found perception, insight-primed,
Takes further that long process whereby we
Insatiate learners grasp each aptly-timed
And thought-occasioned opportunity.

3

So, at a larger stretch, with this my strange
Reliance on the stimulus of text,
Acute art-writing, or two-way exchange
Between art and critique to find what vexed

Thought's reckoning now available to eye's
Fresh apprehension, or what eye first found
Plain baffling now our own to recognise,
Like music late emergent from mere sound.

Yet there's more to it: how, for me, the words
Of gifted commentary are apt to strike
My thoughtful eye just as a note unheard's
Brought out distinctly by a well-placed mike,

Or detail of a painting that's so far
Escaped one's notice suddenly takes on
The radiance of a newly sighted star
Or word-key to some long-lost lexicon.

An odd pathology, you'll say, though one
With certain rare advantages if you're,
Like me, not apt to think art's work is done
When once we've seen what we were looking for,

Picked out what guidebooks told us to pick out,
And thereby shown ourselves unbothered should
We good conformist types be left without
More thought-responsive notions of 'the god'.

4

The cognitive psychologists debate
These matters and divide on whether it's
Sealed mental modules that encapsulate
Our various art-responses – as befits

A compartmentalised approach to how
We process such experience – or whether
Those so-called modules must, in truth, allow
That the most diverse inputs flow together,

Impinge on us in various ways, and thus
Provide us with the mental repertoire
It takes to get from raw sense-stimulus
To music that compels us bar-to-bar,

Or poetry whose power exceeds the scope
Of purebred formalist creeds, or paintings whose
Effect on us has module-fanciers grope
For any suchlike theory fit to use.

All of which says we'll likely not convince
The visually acute that there's a case
For boxed-up thinking in that manner since
It so conspicuously finds no place

For any half-way adequate response
On any viewer's part. It seems that they've
Gone far wide of the mark, those who'd ensconce
Art's flame as if in some sealed autoclave

Whose inner space is so remote from all
Its living contexts – on whatever scale,
From personal to world-historical –
That we may come to doubt both kinds of tale,

Cog-sci and formalist, when told in that
Reductive way and thus, at some point, chance
To change our view. Then we may wonder at
Our having missed what now looks to enhance

The artwork's meaning, stimulate our sense
Of its expressive nuances, extend
Our grasp of details and their salience
For the alerted viewer, and suspend

That current prejudice that had us draw
Some doctrine-tightened cordon sanitaire
Around the work or place our trust in raw
(No matter just how complex) neuro-ware

To do what only human brains along
With human knowledge, culture, and their yield
In painterly rapport can do for Strong
AI whatever new tricks it may wield.

5

Almost I think it my good fortune, this
Devotion, penchant, predilection, need –
Describe it as you will – for what they miss,
Those insta-viewers not impelled to read

Around, consult Kunstkritiker, and brood
On sketches, influences, or the trail
Of a reception-history that, when viewed
In such a light, may turn out to include

Far more of those 'intrinsic' attributes
That Kantians, snobs and purists wish to hive
Securely off at just the point that suits
Their purpose. Please remark how they derive

As many 'insights' from 'the work alone'
As might gain credence, not flat disbelief,
While smuggling in all sorts of items known
Exclusively to those whose watching brief

Takes in the very latest scholarship
Or looks out sharp for all those handy bits
Of art-historic fact that might just tip
Them off as to some detail that admits

A claim to *apperçus* arrived at through
The exercise of judgement unalloyed
By such 'extraneous' stuff but less a coup
For pure aesthetic taste than ruse deployed

To pull the fine-art wool. All goes to prove,
Or so I'd say, the trick – the subtle cheat –
By which those boardroom formalists remove
(Or try to) every sign of the elite

Class interests that dictate their skipping clean
Across the masterwork's reception-history,
Its grubby origins, the tawdry scene
Of artworld deals, and leaving it a mystery

Why genius in painting should attract
Such huge investment from a master-class
Of philistines who've else entirely lacked
A taste for anything save graft and brass.

6

Much better you just let it go, that old,
Outmoded set of notions and instead
Allow the work to slacken off its hold
On your sensorium, not be misled

By low desires in high-toned Kantian guise
But have some undeceiving truths invade
That frame whose edge no longer signifies
A flat 'Keep out'. Now it reads: 'see displayed,

Within this space, a work that erstwhile banked,
Like us its owner-dealers, on the rule
That zealously upheld its sacrosanct
Removal from the swarming vestibule

Of critics, art-historians and plain
Art-vandals who'd so blithely deconstruct
The boundary where painters stand to gain
The artwork's pure aesthetic usufruct

While we can just as freely buy and sell
The stuff that looks so good on boardroom walls –
Until, that is, the clued-up dealers tell
Us straight: "get shot before the sale-price falls!".

It's living in the secondary, I grant
The purists that, but living all the same,
And viewing art in ways the purist can't,
Or mustn't, let intrude within the frame

For fear that such contextualising modes
Of art-talk might prune down so far toward
The roots of beauty – or the social codes
Sustaining it – that artworks won't afford

Them cover when 'appreciation' loses
All claim to signify aesthetic taste
And just means 'what the smart investor uses
To see no Hirst or Emmins goes to waste'.

For is it not, 'the secondary', our room
For taking thought, the native element
Of all reflection where artworks assume
Their proper place, like any life-event,

And, salient or not, gain nothing by
The kind of primacy that's reinforced
With multiple injunctions to apply
Just those art-licensed strategies endorsed

Amongst the cognoscenti who enjoy
Just those works and in just that way that earns
Assent, not from the fractious hoi polloi,
But high-art types in search of high returns.

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Clearing Out



Clearing out old papers, that we all can do,
But what about the life those papers hold
What episodes are hidden in each fold,
So much to celebrate, so much to rue.

We've hidden from ourselves so much that's true,
The times we were too timid or too bold,
Action was precipitate, but the writing's cold,
Left to the critic's even colder view.

No papers can't make present what is past
Those silent histories that show
The part of us that they have made to last.

And then the last certificate of all
The document solicitors have to know,
The final paper Fate permits to fall.

Edward Greenwood



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