

**Benedictus**

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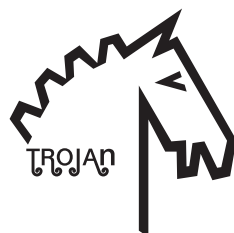
### **Mini mags**

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*Hallucination before departure* (2006)

# Benedictus

Chester Eagle



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## A child, a bike and a storm

I am eight or nine years of age and I am riding home after school. Riding home means riding west, and this often means facing headwinds, but on the day I wish to describe there is no wind, so I am riding quickly, hurrying because the sky is dark, dark blue. A storm is approaching. Behind me, in the eastern sky, all is normal; ahead of me is something huge, and I am riding into it. From the little town where I go to school there are three miles to be covered before I get to the gate of our farm, and then I'll swing at right angles to the Deniliquin road, down 'the avenue', as we call it, a track to our house which the first owner has lined with pepper trees (*Schinus Molle*). Once I'm between these trees the house is in sight, but while I'm on the main road I feel more in view of whatever's looking down, more public, vulnerable, more exposed.

I'm riding home and the sky tells me, by its lofty power, that it's getting ready to unleash something. I'm frightened, and I'm strangely calm. It's common for me to face headwinds on both of my daily rides because we live on the wrong side of town for cyclists; the wind changes somewhere in the school hours and I often face two headwinds a day. But not this time. There is an ominous calm, and the wheels of my bike seem to be enjoying themselves as they spin over the sand where it's sandy, and spin along the bitumen in the tiny patches where the council has sealed a few yards, usually near a bridge, for some reason I don't understand.

I'm an obedient boy and I don't understand much, so I do what my parents and teachers tell me. Those who put rules in my life are sensible. Nobody's ever broken trust with me. I know the world is dark, somewhere out there, because there's a terrible war being fought, but I also know that the people my parents know live cleanly, honourably in fact. There are no moral complications in my life. I look at the dark, dark blue that's approaching, and I see an enormous force making its way slowly from west to east. I'm riding home, I'm in a hurry, but time seems to be suspended. I'm alone, and there are no rules. The dark blue stretches beyond the horizon and in our flat country that's a long way away. This weather system is over my head by now, and its other end is out of sight. I am alone, apprehensive rather than frightened, and I also find what's happening to be exhilarating. I haven't turned tail, I'm heading into it as fast as my legs can push those pedals down. I realise now and perhaps I realised then that I'm racing the storm. I'm giving it a contest and since it's holding back the thunder, lightning and downpour which are certainly within its powers, I'm winning!

I'm pretty sure I can get home before it lets loose, and I do. Mother, who's frightened of storms, is pleased to have me arrive, and she sits me near the stove for the hot drink and toast she gives me in the cold months (something from the fridge when it's hot). Once I'm there I forget the sky outside. Our house is safe. It's cosy in the kitchen, and Mother wants to know what I did at school that day. I suppose I tell her, but my memories are of the sky, and the ride home, the time when I was exposed to the forces of the world. Casting my mind back, in old age, to the many times I rode in and out to school, I have any number of impressions, but only one of a ride when it seemed that the world had a unity and I also possessed it simply by riding, humbly yet in contestation with what was coming. The storm was an invader enforcing unity. There was no resisting that storm. I was little, and had no power, except to pedal. I pedalled with joy. My bike went as fast as it had ever gone for me. The air was still, and I felt pure. If the approaching storm had tried to wipe me out it would have found me alive and kicking! I'd have hidden under a tree. If there'd been a bridge, I might have got into the big concrete pipe that let the water through. But I didn't hide. I was intensely happy pushing my bike toward the advancing sky. It didn't frighten me at all, and it did. This means that I felt it might do something terrible to me if I showed fear, so

I knew I mustn't. It was teaching me joy. I was equal to the storm as long as I was in the contest, which meant I had to keep riding. I did! I pedalled my little heart out until I got home and put the bike in the laundry before rushing in to Mother, by the fire, with her welcome of love, courtesy and cocoa. 'Were you frightened?' Mother asked. 'No,' I said, boldly and with semi-truth. I had been a little frightened, but I'd loved it, and much as I loved being home I'd loved the ride into the approaching storm even more. As best I can remember I think the ride home that day would have taken between thirty and forty minutes. Something like that; not very long. Looking back, over sixty years later, it seems a great event to me. In writing this prelude, I've tried to stop myself ascribing purposes or intentions to the sky I rode under that day, and I've tried to concentrate on the exhilaration I felt: the thrill of being challenged, I think it was. I've placed the ride home that day at the beginning of this book because as far as I can recall it was my first awareness of something that's lurked around my life often enough since then. I shall use the essays that follow to explore this ... whatever it is that lurks at the edges of human life and consciousness.

One of the difficulties of thinking about such things is that we become more sophisticated as we age, which means we've got better defences to hide things from ourselves when they don't fit the ways we've constructed to view the world. That boy of eight or nine didn't have too many of those devices operating, so he was open to the sky, the storm, and the effects it caused inside him. I'm pleased to find him rising to the challenge: I hope the man he gave rise to will be as unafraid, even if apprehensive, today.

## *The Perennial Philosophy*

Still on the farm. We are a stable family. Other people move into the district, replacing those who've moved away, but of course a solid core stays on, letting decades pass as they work industriously on their properties, making a little money when they can. Then the years of depression and war give way to prosperity, horses give way to cars, and lights are suspended over rolled and watered greens so that people can play bowls on nights when it's better to be outside than in. If there's a mysticism about the Australian land it's one that has to do with heat. The soil's hot if you walk on it with bare feet, the walls of houses heat up and radiate, the brilliant sun carves wrinkles in people's faces. The land is harsh on those who work it, yet they repay it with a patient, devoted love. My parents love their farm, yet they've sent me to school in Melbourne, then to university, and I come home, not to farm, but to have a holiday before returning to study.

When I'm home I do any work that Father needs me to do, but the rest of the time I'm on holiday. On one university vacation I read all the plays of Shakespeare that I haven't read before. By the time I go back to Melbourne I've read the lot, from *Henry VI Part 1* to *The Tempest*. Prospero, Caliban, Ariel and the rest are in my mind as I drive the tractor through the paddocks Father is going to plant with wheat. I can say to people in Melbourne that I didn't waste my time! I don't remember any of them asking me what the land had taught me, and I didn't try to tell them that.

By day the land was farming land, but by night it became something else. What? This is not easy to say, so I'll start with a book I was reading at the time, *The Perennial Philosophy* of Aldous Huxley<sup>(1)</sup>. It might have been better for me if I'd never read this book, but perhaps it was a phase I had to go through; that is to say, its contents were a part of my nature. I read the book to find out about myself, and we have to do this if our self-understanding is to progress. Nothing makes me more wary, today, than people who've got unadmitted forces raging beneath and inside the things they profess to be. Huxley strikes me, in retrospect, as a man not happy with what his own humanity made him: such men are problematical when they're not actively dangerous. He had one very good effect on me; I read his *Music at night* essays and they led me to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, something I'll discuss later. He also wrote *Brave New World*, and I read it with disgust at the crassness, the shallowness of human beings who couldn't admit to their lives the passion, power and the massive engagement with their fate which Shakespeare's characters endured, or underwent. In Huxley's brave new world there were a tiny handful of people who knew Shakespeare but the masses lived simple lives that were controlled to give them the happiness, if it is, of battery hens. One way of doing this was to give them plenty of sex. In the new world, people are forever young, until the last hours before their death, and their bodies are active as often as possible. It is as if they have a duty to satisfy desire. Huxley makes his readers feel contempt for this mindless pursuit of nubility. He somehow manages to insist to his readers that when his characters of the future say they are happy then we know they are not. He forces on his readers – and I was a willing one – the same contempt for the carnal that he expresses for himself. His book was an awful influence on my young mind, its only redeeming feature being the frequent quotes from Shakespeare which had the effect of creating an age, long past, of golden understanding.

I also read, as I have said, his essays on mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy*. The book opened up for me layers of human experience that I had not been aware of. I was mightily impressed by the idea that the universe had a 'ground' roughly equivalent to what Christians called God, or the divinity, and that this divinity, this ground, was located in individual humans as well as outside, or beyond, them. *That*, said many of the people quoted by Huxley, art thou, and thou art That. The

tautological nature of this assertion bothered me not at all. Solemn, incantatory, it sounded good! My high-Anglican schooling had given me the idea that great truths were sonorous, reverberant; voices of great understanding rang out in imposing spaces. This was the way it was when God was speaking, or being spoken about. That art thou, and thou art That. Huxley quoted William Eckhart:

To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the Ground of the Soul are one and the same.

And again:

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.

*The Perennial Philosophy* was published in 1947 and today I am inclined to think of it as an assertion, or reminder, by Huxley that humanity, which had been at war with itself for several decades, needed to turn its mind in another direction. And I, with my university protecting me, and life's dangers ahead, was looking for a safety zone, I think. I had given up believing in God but the spiritual dimension needed development, understanding ... and the spiritual, it seemed to me then, though perhaps I could not have said this, even to myself, was about the only protection from what happened when people gave way to their sexuality.

I had not given way to mine. I masturbated frequently but this was sex without its consequences, or so I thought. (To refrain from effect is to choose an effect, I now feel.) My sexuality struggled to find a place in social life, at which I was no more than averagely adept. Working on the farm, when Father needed me, was easy. Shopping, or doing messages for Mother, was easy. Courtesy to the farmers who lived near us, or people in our town, came naturally enough, because the town, surrounded by farms, was the world I'd grown up in. But a wider world, a huge undetermined space, of awareness, commitment, morality, choices and decisions, was making me aware of itself as I developed, and as I absorbed my reading. I was bored with the farm and the world of farmers. I went through the motions by day, or I read Shakespeare. At night I went for walks.

The night was my release. The discipline of submitting to the sun was removed. Nights were clear, and windless. Stars shone in the heavens. The binding rules of daytime yielded to the mystery, and potential, of night. I could walk up and down the avenue, through the paddocks, or along the roads that bordered our farm, confident of being alone. My parents and our neighbours were inside their houses, little lights in the darkness. The trees, not that so very many had been left by the early selectors, were so black that they had more of the night in them than the skies above. The moon, when it rose, was majestic. I sometimes lay down in the paddocks, trying to absorb whatever it was that made the moon so impersonal in its consideration of the earth. Huxley had made it clear that humans who wished to know the divine inside themselves had to begin by cultivating detachment, loosening themselves from the passions that take over humans so easily.

This was dangerous, I now think, because I was in the phase of life when passion rules most strongly and there was also a desperate need for commitment. Young people need causes. At the time of maximum awareness it's natural to seize on some simplification and say it's right, other commitments are wrong, and then to make war upon them, with bullets and swords, or with ideas. Arguments! At my university college, I took part in discussions all the time. Theorising, and refutation, disputation, took place day and night, and I enjoyed it. It was a way of life, and it was so endless that even a victory in argument, or a crushing defeat, became yesterday's event when a new day was dawning. The summer nights I am describing, however, the nights when I went walking, politely rejecting Mother's offer to walk with me, 'if I'd like some company', seemed to be waiting for me to make up my mind. The night was neutral, but it made me impatient. I thought I should be finding something. Revelation should be revealing itself. The serenity, the impersonality of

night, was endless, but it wasn't repeated in me. Try as I could to enter the serenity, I knew I was turbulent. After lying down and considering the night sky, I got up again, and walked. An hour or so later I would go home. Mother would say, 'Did you have a good walk?' and I would say that I had. Mother might offer tea, if it had been made, or a cold drink, and I would read. Father, I think, must have found my walking strange, but he never commented. I think he belonged to the school that expects people to sort out their thinking for themselves, confident that people from good families would find good ways to live. Today, I see that I was and I am Father's and Mother's child. The night never told me anything unexpected, never did anything but settle the earth after a baking day and get it ready for another.

What I was wanting, what I was waiting for, was a mystery to me until, many years later, I saw the gothic cathedrals of Europe and understood them in a flash, with their wondrous windows admitting the light of another world, pressing on this one, ever so close, but available only for those souls ready to let themselves fly, lift, float, drift or rise in glory from this world to that one. That world, I might have said, if I'd remembered my Huxley (I didn't), is this one, and this world is that one, the two are close, each is available to the other, but the movement from one to the other is usually and all-too-normally in the downwards direction. There never seemed to be any God (or god) in the skies of New South Wales, only sunlight (!) or moonlight, ever so gentle by comparison, but equally impervious, impersonal, saying nothing, but shining down without any attempt to change the world or offer a way out of it. Lying in the paddocks, waiting for the moon to reveal answers to the sense of mystery I carried with me – did it really come from the night, or was it a part of me, unresolved, that was pressing on my thoughts? – I could do no better, after a few minutes, than to get up and walk on. Or walk home.

Have a cup of tea or a glass of lemonade with Mother, with Father, read a book for a while, then go to bed, to rise, the following morning, for another hot day. Father had a simple response to people grumbling about the heat. 'If you think it's going to be hot,' he said every summer, 'get out in the paddock and do a bit of work. You'll soon be thinking about what you're doing, not bothering yourself with the heat.' It never failed to work for him and I admire him for it now. He was a man who got things done, and I was a young man, mystified by the world I was growing into, with a head full of questions, and a sky above which never, by day or by night, provided any answers.

## Music (1)

The Eagle family laughed about music. My uncle Teddy, we all said, had such a bad ear that he couldn't recognise 'God Save the King' until everyone stood up. (It was played at the beginning of picture shows, and, if there was a piano handy, at the start and often again at the end of community meetings.) Mother, who laughed at Teddy, was no better; she liked to whistle tunes, as she called them, as she washed the dishes, but anyone sitting in the next room heard only a prolonged sound, on the one note, until she ran out of breath. Father claimed to like popular songs, but they meant little to him, except that he did feel free to say that the music known as 'classical' wasn't any good because it didn't have any 'tunes'. I don't remember anyone asking what sort of tunes he liked but I feel he would have said, 'Oh, something you can whistle' or 'Something that sticks in your mind.' When the Eagle family got together, they told stories, but nobody ever sang.

When I was twelve I went off to an Anglican school in Melbourne, and encountered its musical traditions; these included folk songs, almost entirely from the British Isles, and hymns. In chapel, there was a choir, which regularly sang anthems, as they were called. I became distantly aware, in these Anglican years, that musicians on the continent of Europe looked down on the British as being musically inferior, but why they thought this I could not have said.

When I got to university I was again resident in an Anglican college, but the Anglicanism, the Britishness, of our position was less strongly maintained. Other music was talked about, occasionally at least. The university had a Conservatorium of Music and there were concerts in the city centre which I began to attend. If I look back on the attitudes of the time, I think that music held equal rank with Shakespeare and the English dramatic tradition as the twin, and major, components of 'culture'. There is an ambivalence, perhaps a multi-valence about this word today which was not there when I started at the University of Melbourne in 1952. There was then thought to be little enough culture in fiercely practical Australia but what there was came from the quality levels of European societies and it was undisputably good. The Marxist idea that 'culture' was a means to maintain the domination of the upper classes was never mentioned and was almost certainly unknown. The ingredients, the effects, of what later came to be called 'high' culture were thought to be important in the forming of well-rounded, well-developed people, the sort of people who could be relied on to run a country's institutions. Countries needed such people, so it was wise, and healthy, for societies to ensure that some at least of their people – the ones whose decisions would matter – were cultivated in appropriate ways.

The viewpoint that I am sketching here was regarded as so normal, so unquestionable, in the school and college which completed the education I began in the wheatfields of New South Wales, that I have never quite been able to overcome my surprise when I hear it questioned, or, more likely, ridiculed by those many people who would think these ideas reactionary.

So music was part of the life of a cultured person, and so I began to attend concerts in the Melbourne Town Hall and listen to some of the music broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, mostly, as I recall, the more popular arias from Italian opera. Not bad stuff, I thought, though like Father I could have wished for the tunes to crop up more often than they did.

Then something happened. I came back from three months of military training, compulsory at that time, at the Puckapunyal army camp on friendly terms with a young man called Don Adams. Don had been a quiz kid and had prodigious quantities of information and even learning in the recesses of his mind. He knew a great deal about music and he told me that if I came with him to a house in East Melbourne where he had Open Sesame, I would be able to hear endless amounts of great music on the high quality sound system that its owner had developed. I went.

I became fascinated. Life took on several, indeed an almost alarming number, of new dimensions, above all an awareness that there were people for whom fine music and the highest possible levels of performance were a necessary part of life. The encounter which I wish to describe was of such importance in my life that I feel a need to draw breath, as it were, before trying to say what forces had added themselves to each other at this most impressionable time of my life.

In earlier books I have described my childhood in the Australian farming tradition<sup>(2)</sup>, and my encounter with the world of privilege at Melbourne Grammar School<sup>(3)</sup>; these two streams flowed together without too much discomfort, because many, many others had joined them before I came along. What was clear to me as I listened to Bach, Beethoven and others at the East Melbourne house, was that the culture of Europe which had looked askance at that of Great Britain for centuries, was of amazing eloquence and power. No wonder the Germans, Italians and French thought themselves superior. They were! The Spaniards and the Russians, too, made music and the qualities that made their peoples different could be found in their music. Palestrina, Thomas Luis Da Victoria! My friend Vans Ovenden – he who owned the East Melbourne house – nodded as the soaring voices of these composers filled his rooms. People came there after concerts, talking about what they'd heard. The world had been imagined many times over, in a vast variety of ways, in the music of Europe. Schubert softened your heart. Wagner roared like a god, setting off his voices with the amazing sonorities of an orchestration like no other. Maurice Ravel, on the other hand, wrote his music with the delicacy of a master chef, or do I mean master surgeon? I began to buy recordings; I took them to Vans' house, night after night. Vans knew what was happening, and made me welcome. He gave me a key to his house. I opened its door whenever I was free of university demands. This was a learning time, a development time, for which I owed next to nothing to my farming background, or my Anglican education: indeed it was barely connected, or so it felt, with anything much in Australia's life, and it was going on in a rather run-down address near a park in East Melbourne, and it was open to any and all who knocked on the door at any time of day or night, so long as they had a bottle or two under their arms.

Well!

I want to say that heaven had opened but Vans' door presented less of a barrier than that. So Mozart and Bach had led passionate lives unlike anything we'd seen in my country. I couldn't digest this, partly because I was so young, so much in my formative stage, but also because I was so ignorant. I really didn't know anything about music. In my years of schooling there had only been one moment when I'd tapped into this mighty stream, and I remember it well. In my second last year at school, there had been a Christmas service on the last Sunday before we boarders went back to wherever we came from, and the choir sang several specially prepared pieces, and the last of them, before we filed out, was the Hallelujah Chorus of George Frederick Handel. I was amazed. I'd heard it before, but on the radio, and to have it sung before me was quite overwhelming. Handel, I'd read somewhere, had had a huge religious experience at the time he'd been writing this music, and it seemed to me that he'd transferred his own revelation straight into his famous chorus. What a knockout! I blazed with excitement.

What I didn't do, then, was to find out more about Handel and his music. I think I assumed that it was always there, available, when of course it wasn't. But at Vans' East Melbourne house, it was. Music was. So also were the strange and sometimes wondrous love lives of many, many people, and their drinking habits, their wish to sleep with each other or their inability to sleep, but over everything presided Vans, who loved few things more than Franz Josef Haydn with a flagon of port at 4am, or even a little nearer to what was for everybody else in his city, breakfast time. Going to work time. Getting up and showering, dressing, cleaning shoes time. Not for Vans, sponging off his father, his mother and his brothers, not that that stopped them loving him. Steadily, steadily, absorbing everything I heard in his house from the recordings which I and any number of others

brought there, I began to build up an account of European music from Gregorian chant to the atonalism of Schoenberg and Alban Berg; I don't remember that any of us had heard of Anton Webern at that stage.

I read about music in the Baillieu library and I discovered that my own college library had a gramophone and a modest pile of recordings which I began to play. I was a painfully responsible student when it came to doing my reading and getting essays finished, but I spent as many hours as I could in the college library trying to understand the mighty forces to which music gave expression. I listened to as wide a variety as I could, but I think, looking back, that two main strands, or currents, can be discerned in my listening. I loved, and needed, music that was triumphally assertive (the odd-numbered Beethoven symphonies, the 4th and 5th symphonies of Carl Nielsen), or music that took itself apart from the daily activity of mankind (the Passions of Heinrich Schutz, the *Missa Solemnis*, and especially its *Benedictus*, of Ludwig van Beethoven).

Having brought my argument to this point I will pause, and resume in the later section called *Music (2)*.

## Looking down

I left university and started teaching. This was a disaster at first, but I became good at it, partly because I no longer felt alienated from the town where I was employed. It had mountains to the north, and I had become fascinated by them. I went exploring in my little Volkswagen, I got maps and discovered tracks and the forgotten places they led to. I had something to talk about when with locals, on their farms or in the pubs where men seemed most at home. I had questions for everybody and they became accepting of me because I wanted to know how Gippsland understood itself, and what its experiences had been. I was on the way to becoming an insider instead of the outsider I'd been.

Over time, my fascination with, my adoration of, the eastern mountains settled on two places: Mount Baldhead and Castle Hill. I have written about the meanings I associate with the first of these places in *Wainwrights' Mountain*<sup>(4)</sup>, so it is Castle Hill which I want to deal with now. Castle Hill: when I returned from trips to Melbourne, I could pick it up as the road swung north coming out of Sale, a ledge, end-on, slowly turning itself as I drove east, or an imposing crag if I went north-west of my town to find the Dargo road, over which the Castle loomed, close, distant, scornful yet attentive, beckoning to something unsettled, unanswered in my mind. I asked people how one got there and they told me what they knew. With various friends I made attempts to walk there, eventually I succeeded, and this is what I wrote<sup>(5)</sup>:

... the towns of Gippsland ... lie unnoticed by day, in the blur of distance, but by night each shows itself with a sprinkling of lights. On a full moon night, with heaven's stars diminished by their queenly competitor, these shine out of an ocean of black as if the firmament is reversed, until the moving lights of a car set one identifying its destination. *There* is Lindenow, there Bairnsdale; there Stratford, Sale and Maffra, an hour's journey indicated by a flick of a finger. Briagolong lies too close in under the foothills and can only be guessed at behind the deeper darkness of mountains. Open ground again – Traralgon set about by farm lights, Morwell a star cluster, the ugly Latrobe valley transformed into linking constellations. Over one's shoulder there are hints of Dargo and a flicker in the south-east. Lakes Entrance? Metung? A ship? On nights of heavy cloud the glow of Melbourne reflects like an aurora behind the bulk of Wellington. West and north are darkness, beyond Dargo darkness again, with Omeo and the townships on the Tambo deep out of sight behind Baldhead and his twenty-mile buttresses. Magic mystical night! The old rockpile sits up like an offering left by the retreating earth, a place of exposure to the void. To lie there is rejection, the world put away, the self opened in ecstasy for the shining white light. An opulent moon floods the Castle top and half the planet besides. Leaf-edges glitter and smoke-grey branches rise out of shadow. The valleys breathe out a mist that laps against the rim of the high country. In the early hours of morning it steals over the parapet and washes against the Castle. Then the sun announces morning, the breeze lifts and swirls of mist fume about as if hot springs are gushing. The sun is a red spot, swelling and fading, then the mist clears, the wonder fades, and one is left with Gippsland spread quietly around and a long, long walk to the car.

It is a peak of experience, unwillingly left. It hurts, tramping down, down, down, to think of the old crag accepting noon, sundown and night, moon, mist and sunrise with the blandness of immortals. If one could stay there forever ... but the mind must go on, seek further ...

The mind is an organ that likes to go in several, even many, directions at once. The mind likes to have its cakes and eat them too. It's more than forty years, now, since I last visited Castle Hill, and even longer since I lay in the paddocks of my parents' farm, wondering why I couldn't easily find the illumination that I hoped would enter my life. Why couldn't I join all the people that Huxley had quoted, the mystics, the seers, the illuminated ones? He did say somewhere that illumination came to people according to their type, and just as some people's minds made it right for them to

abandon the flesh and the world in order to go out from themselves to connect with the divinely mysterious force, there were also other people, of contrasting temperament, who found illumination in the world by acceptance, not rejection. If I look back now on the young man walking the paddocks and the roads surrounding his farm, I judge that he is taking the wrong path towards the illumination he desires; very few of the forces that drive people toward the edges of consciousness are present in him. He is vain enough to think that the spiritual thing he knows is in him sets him apart; it seems obvious to me, him, now, that the spiritual part of humans joins us, bonds us, rather than the opposite. If there is something special in me, there is almost certainly something special in you, and the person on the other side of you, too. The divinity can be democratic as well as it can be anything else and if I, today, look at the young man who walked the paddocks by night, I see a fear in him that he may not be as singular as he likes to think he is. And yet, the older version of this young man, the one that climbs a range that takes him and his friends to the climb known in Gippsland as The Jump-up, the one that hurries across the flat to a point where he can see the Castle, close at hand, waiting for its visitors to climb aboard, he too needs some sort of singularity in his description of himself. The illumination, the uninterrupted vision, that he seeks can only be achieved after prodigious effort has put him and his friends apart from the world, high above it, looking down. I have the fondest memories of Castle Hill, looking back, and remember with joy the celebration my friends had when we got home from our first ascension, and remember too the excitement of hauling ourselves up between the last few rocks before we could stand on the Castle and look back to see where we'd come from, and then to identify all the points of the known world with which we had surrounded ourselves. I remember how clear, and pure, everything seemed when one had completed the climb: the effort, the striving, had created the goal, the zenith from which we looked upon the world – from above. If we connected with everything in the vast region we overlooked it was because we had placed ourselves in a position of spiritual superiority ... or so we believed.

Equal spirituality was not at that time in my life a goal which had even entered my mind as a possibility. Peaks were available only to those prepared to put their energy into climbing high. From peaks, one was able to look out, and down. Those observed were lower. Exaltation came from being high. On high! I had a house in Bairnsdale which was the base for these Castle Hill expeditions, and from its back yard I could look to the north west when I went out to my car. Far away, over the fence that separated me from my neighbour, I could see the Castle and the Moroka plateau with its notable edge points – Mount Wellington, the Pinnacles, and the mountain I have been talking about. If I went out at sun-up, the Castle caught the first rays of light while my town was still without them. At the end of the day it sat there darkly, the last rays of the sun on the side I couldn't see. Storms gathered there, snow clung to its sides, in season: it was as close to being eternal as anything in this world can be. It was near, it was far, and that was how I wanted it to be.

## The Goths aspire

In 1979, at the age of 45, I made my first trip out of Australia. My wife had been to Europe two years earlier as a tutor on an art study tour, and she said we had to travel as a family. I was ready, and we did. I remember looking down on desert regions of Western Australia as we flew out, marvelling at them, but knowing that they and everything else would look different when I came back. I was on my way to the places that had been historic before white Australia had come into being. Black Australia didn't matter very much to me, then.

Europe seemed to me to be one long succession of marvels, and it was extraordinarily dense, to Australian eyes. Humanity couldn't escape itself. Even the thickest forests – not *very* thick – only lasted for a few moments before train windows showed the evidence of human labour again. You barely left behind the ambience of one city before entering the influence of another. Australia was very scrappy by comparison. And the great churches, I came to realise, had been made large enough to accommodate the populations of the towns they dominated, standing on high ground and pushing their spires into the sky. Saint Peters, in Rome, had been designed to impress: the Church, it proclaimed, was the way to God, the only intermediary. Protestantism was dismissed by this building and all who celebrated within it.

Florence and Barcelona had mighty cathedrals too, but it was in Paris that I saw that the gothic period had created something that anticipated me. Notre Dame was ready. I knew very early on that something of its effect, its claims and its achievements, had filtered into the thinking of my upbringing, even in a land created at the time of the European enlightenment, a huge country only lightly sprinkled with churches even humbler than the settlements they served. Christianity, it seemed to me, had barely made it to our shores, but in Europe it was fundamental, and its claims were made by its buildings and most strongly, in my imagination, by Notre Dame and the other cathedrals of north-western France that I saw over the next few years.

Chartres, Rheims, Rouen, Amiens, Beauvais, the exquisite Sainte Chapelle, and mighty Notre Dame, again and again. What did I see, and, seeing it, what reverberations did I hear against my inner walls?

Gothic buildings, I realised after a time, were created by the transformation from within of earlier Romanesque churches. Some new awareness had entered the minds of believers, needing expression in stone, and glass. The buildings grew higher, their steeples sharper. The openings that let light into their gloom were made focal, glass filling the opening both to elaborate on the stories on which the faith depended for its exemplars, and to show with overwhelming conviction both the miracle of light, and what its existence meant.

The central fact of gothic architecture is that it works in metaphors, quite a few of them, in fact. The body of the church is called the nave, from *navis*, a ship: so those who worship in the church are on a journey, even if not actually in motion. The nave is oriented so the sanctuary is illuminated by the rising sun: light from the east. The other end of the nave is lit from the west, so that the idea of the nave as a ship is supported by the sunlight acting to give the day, and the worship taking place in the church, a beginning and an ending.

The other dimension of the church is up: the amazing and in some cases almost preposterous dimension of the building is its height. This is done to suggest man's ability to rise towards heaven, and his inability to reach it. God must therefore come down, as the Christian faith says he did when he sent his son to earth to become a human being, like us. But upwards is not the church's only movement; the nave is given two transepts, causing it to resemble a cross, with all the ideas and associations, the history of that word, that shape: God's son died on a cross, so that the church by

its very shape is a reminder of Jesus' story and its implications for mankind. There is also the role of the glass which, as mentioned in an earlier essay, both separates us from and reminds us of that other world which hovers close to this one, making us, sinful and inadequate humanity, wonder how the gap can be bridged, the invisible made see-able, the impossible apparent here on earth. How can God's kingdom become man's dwelling place?

Glass, stone, light and space, are filled with sounds – music, preaching – and silence: prayer and meditation. Returning to Australia after my trips to Europe, and looking down on the enormous emptiness of my own land, it seemed to me that we in this country could never repeat the miracle of gothic spirituality. The land didn't inspire it, nobody seemed to aspire to it. The land was so flat that it simply couldn't have the effect of sending people's thoughts toward heaven, and heaven, earth and hell are, after all, a di- or tri-chotomy that doesn't rise naturally from the Australian land, nor do they rise easily from the times of white settlement in Australia. The gothic ideas still lie in our minds, sending currents through them from time to time, but the peculiar combination of beliefs and surging aspirations to define God's wishes and make oneself pleasing to him, so that redemption won't be denied ... the gothic combination will never occur again. It's happened, it's part of our history, the evidence is still there, except when warfare has damaged the cathedrals beyond replacement, but the facts are that (a) we can build much higher buildings today, any time, anywhere (*vide* New York); (b) we can get even higher by plane, satellite, or rockets pushing our consciousness into parts of the universe much further away than the mediaeval heaven; and (c) the gothic builders achieved their miracle by concentrating the spiritual efforts of mankind in separate, defined, localised places. They gave up on ordinary, daily life and concentrated their efforts into one (very large) space. Inside the cathedral, people could be made holy. Outside, they were probably, and largely, irredeemable.

We, today, I think, have committed ourselves to something less gloomy, more hopeful and much more difficult: we want, or we say we want, all mankind to live well, healthily, and happily if possible. People at any point on earth can know, and often do know, how all the others are getting on, all around this globe of ours, and we know we can't be content when others are in misery.

We can't? Bullshit!

Well, we know we shouldn't ...

If I look back now on the years of my encounter with the gothic cathedrals, I see them as something of a necessary distraction. They handed me a part of my own history, as an ex-Christian still in part a European, and allowed me to consider what I had been made, all unbeknown to myself. Even the Lutheran Bach, the cathedrals said, derives from this, and the other voices you love, the music you listen to by Victoria and the rest, was written to be performed in the soaring spaces you have now seen. Even in the silences of your land, the cathedrals said to me, those great spaces where a building with an aspiration to touch heaven, to scratch it from underneath, would be silly ... even in those silences you can still catch echoes of what we did here in Europe, and you will keep hearing those echoes until you hear what the great wide silences are saying to you. To do this, you will need different ears.

I have reached the point where I am almost ready for the presentations I will make in later sections, 'Spirituality of the land', and 'Spirituality of the ordinary, the everyday'. But first, or is it last, something that has slipped between the cracks in what I've written so far.

This will seem trivial but for me it is a sticking point in my consideration of the gothic revelation. On that first visit to Paris, my wife and I didn't spend all our time in cathedrals. We visited lots of places and saw unexpected things. We went to the Pompidou Centre one day and before we could get to the door we were stopped by our daughter's fascination for a man who was swallowing swords and lying on broken glass in order to allow others to stand on his stomach. Each time he did this he went around with a hat to collect money, but he was so taken by my daughter's

enthusiasm that he asked her to collect his money for him. This, she thought, could only happen far from home. She spent the day collecting money for this performer. She joined him in his act. No longer a visitor, she was part of the place. My son went off to look at the Pompidou, and was fascinated by the building. My wife ... I didn't know where she was. She was somewhere in the marvellous displays of the Pompidou. I looked around myself. The day wore on, and it began to grow dark outside. European days are short in winter, to an Australian at least. I thought it was time we went back to our hotel, and got ourselves some dinner on the way. I found my son, I collected my daughter, but couldn't find my wife. I told the young people to stay at the door and to keep an eye out for their mother, while I searched the building.

This took time, even though I hurried. She was nowhere to be found. When I got back to the door, the children were there, but not their mother. So we walked back to the hotel, inspecting everyone in sight. We reached the hotel and went up to our rooms. My wife was in bed, reading, not in the least disturbed by any anxieties we may have been feeling. She knew, she said, that we'd come home eventually.

You may well wonder what this has to do with the mystical theme of these essays. The answer is everything and nothing, or to put it in a better order, nothing and everything. Mystical experience can only be reached, first, and considered, second, if the rest of life is put away. *The Perennial Philosophy* stresses the need for detachment, but how many of us, and how often, can be detached? I pose the question seriously. The Pompidou Centre could not have been built, nor the paintings in it painted, by people who put detachment above other things. The demand for detachment is one of the most far-reaching claims that anyone can make, on others and on themselves. It is, in its way, an extremely selfish claim. The gothic builders made their cathedrals large enough for the services, the worship, conducted in them to be communal. With the aid of the light they focussed to reveal its power, with the aid also of those stories set in blazing glass, they brought the other world so close to this one that nobody could fail to be aware of it. To me this seems to have been both socially and spiritually successful. I've no doubt the trick has been pulled off in other places and periods, but it is the cathedrals of north-west France that were my locus spiritualis ... if one needed one. I now find myself thinking – and this is a huge claim, I realise – that if it can be done in one place it can surely be done anywhere. If – *if* – there is another world, a spiritual force inside and outside humans, with both the inner and the outer aspects of that force somehow linked, then the realisation of that world, that ground, that force, is socially disruptive unless the whole society is in search of it and lives in the profoundest respect for it. I think I am claiming that the individual cannot be illuminated, let alone saved, on his or her own.

This, written early on a summer day in Melbourne, Australia, with a forecast top temperature of Celsius 33, is really another version of something I believe, which is that truth is as much social as it is individual. The heroes of truth are those bravely determined souls who refused to go against their own inner voices; there have been many such figures in the history of humankind, and they are to be admired, no doubt, but the gothic cathedrals were remarkably inclusive, both in the way they were built and in their effect. Some, like La Sainte Chapelle, were built quickly; others, like Strasbourg or Cologne, took centuries. They could never have been built without experts, master builders travelling from one town to another, but neither could they have been built without the faith that they express and assist being commonly held. They make it clear to me that kings and bishops are no more powerful than the aggregated power of the people they rule. Energy and imaginative ability are common: coerced they may be, conscripted and made to serve, but any salvation, any uplift afforded, whether by a building or an idea, is ultimately available to all because it is knowable by all, and if we can know it we can experience it.

We can experience it, that is to say, as long as ... it's true?

Who knows, who can tell, what's true?

Answer, the people of the age.

To go one step further, let me ask, does God exist? My unfashionable answer is that God exists at some times and not at others. If everyone at some particular time and place believes in God then God exists. No question. If nobody believes in God, then God doesn't exist. Also no question.

If people are divided, some do and some don't, then God half-exists, or 70/30 exists, or 20/80 exists. This sounds silly? Think about it.

My last word, then, on the great buildings of the gothic age is that they were creations of an age of faith which, as stated before, is long gone and can never be recreated. If a society can be unified around a central belief, amazing things can be done. We see this too, unfortunately but with equal force, in times of war when society's divisions are ignored in a common cause. Peaceful, tolerant, accepting societies aim much lower than unified societies. And individuals? They can go far alone, but only if someone else does the work.

## 1st interlude: Sexuality and spirituality

It is commonly assumed that sex and the spirit are at opposite poles. You go for one or the other and you have to choose. Was it Saint Augustine who is said to have prayed, 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet'? In Augustine's terms, this is like saying it's my aim to reach the North Pole but for the time I'm heading south. That idea of a cleavage between body and spirit has grievous effects; the Roman Catholic church, for example, insists on its priesthood remaining celibate. They have arguments for this, but the effect is that all too many priests, unable to cope with their sexuality, fall back on interfering with altar-boys and choristers. Affairs with female parishioners are also devastating but not quite so destructive as those with children. Priests and trainee priests have so much difficulty coping with their sexuality that they find it very hard to make peace with themselves and are therefore unable to provide, without hypocrisy, the spiritual leadership their position supposes. They are beaten before they begin because the problems locked into their position are insoluble. Saint Augustine might have had the right idea after all?

I propose to continue my discussion of spirituality not so much by ignoring sexuality as by trying to re-understand, redefine, the two of them because it seems to me that sexuality and spirituality have quite a lot in common, and also that, when things are going well, a powerful love can be as spiritual, if not more so, than anything else in life.

Let me begin in a strange place. When I was a boy at my Anglican school, we were regularly reminded of the sacrifice made by our soldiers. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend.' The words were uttered solemnly on Anzac day. Most of the boys who listened to these words had a fair idea of what it had been like on the western front and were therefore being asked to accept that the worst possible conditions could sustain the most loving deeds: deeds which, however violent, were being done for love of country and/or family members far away. I am inclined, today, to see this way of considering the events of 1914-1918 as a vast mechanism of deceit, but even if I'm right, the deception is by and for those who practise it. There must have been a purpose, we think, and, looking around, it seems that there is or was no other purpose than the protection of ourselves. Whatever dreadful deeds the soldiers did, they did those things for us. Colossal energies were released, we say, in order to secure certain things which were the object of their defenders' love. King, country, the empire, the families of the soldiers ...these were protected by a love so great that men were prepared to die for them.

It has long seemed to me that it is much easier to die for a principle than to live for it. Dying is simpler than resolving the difficulties and contradictions of daily life. Twenty four hours will normally contain most of the difficulties that flesh is heir to. If we decide not to die for love, but to live for it, to live with love as our principle, what will our lives be like? How will anyone looking at us know what's coursing through our minds and veins?

They will probably find it hard to know. The saying has it that all the world loves a lover but in fact most people smile at the actions of those who are consumed by love. We may envy them or think they're foolish, but we know, especially if we've been in love ourselves, that the lover is different. The lover has reasons that others cannot see. Speaking of blindness, the lover simply cannot see his or her beloved as others see them. The rest of us see a plain, ordinary, no more than averagely attractive human of the species, but the lover sees all the things that his or her imagination requires. Lovers impose their own imaginings of the wondrous on each other and then do their best – and often their worst – by way of keeping up with the standard imposed by their mutual imagining. Notice this new force which has entered our discussion – the imagination of

the human species, a limitless and only partially controllable thing. The imagination is no more moral than a rock or a river: it is simply a force, which makes it like sexuality, that other force in life which refuses, as those priests we were talking about discovered, to be put aside. Sexuality uses our bodies to use other people's bodies to cause the race to go on. We are running up against the inadequacies of language here, because the English language imposes the constriction of using the words 'love' and 'lust' to carry the ideas that arise from our experiences and observations. Love and lust. How shall we separate these two, and will we perhaps have to invent new words to deal with the complexities we are getting close to?

Love and lust: I think of the late James Thurber, who said that love is blind but lust doesn't give a good Goddam (implying the extra but absent word 'fuck!'). Lust doesn't care, and will do anything to have its way. Someone else can clean up the results because lust doesn't want to stop and consider. Love, on the other hand, is different. Love ...

Love is a guided version of lust. Love can use strategies as well as tactics. Where lust seizes on another person for its own purposes, love considers the other person, thinks all the time of how to please them, to earn their love, and love is capable of that remarkable development whereby a person places the good of another on a higher level than the good of its own self.

Love can also reach the plane, the level, where it is not only a forgetting of self, but a merging of selves. Two people become one. Each, to return to *The Perennial Philosophy*, is the ground of the other. Here are a few lines from my novel *Victoria Challis*<sup>(6)</sup>:

Bathed in reflected light, he watched while she moved the lens to examine him. He looked into her hair, looked at the fingers he wanted, now, never to be without. Soft hair, tender fingers, eyes of love. Except the lens. He laughed and put his hands in front of his face.

Okay, I don't blame you. I've got a few. And I won't let you take any of me because I hate to have my picture taken. Not very fair I know.

Heavy with love, light with love, they put their arms around each other. The car. Down the hill to his house.

Where are we having dinner?

Anywhere. Something cheap and simple.

They had dinner, lay beside each other.

I've never been in love like this before.

She whispered it so quietly to his pillow that he barely caught the words. She was talking to herself and he knew that no one had ever heard her before. He could catch the words you and you're in her soliloquy of love; he ran his fingers feather-light across her body until he needed to push aside her pillow so he could be beneath those lips, that outpouring. They looked with lens-less eyes into each other, through each other, holding each other, held by an impermanent force that it was unthinkable to imagine would ever leave them.

The two people are Victoria Challis (the book's title) and Frederick (Fred) Holyoake, a postman and a politician's wife. They read each other's intentions easily, their thoughts passing from one mind to the other:

Something about this irritated Leanne.

'Why don't you ever say her name, Fred? Isn't she called Vicky?'

She noticed his face tighten.

'We never say each other's names. Where we meet, there are no names.'

Each has the capacity to enter the other, and know what's happening there. Each knows how special a consideration this is.

Love of loves.

They touched shyly at the door.

I've brought you some sheets.

Inside, they traced the patterns.

They're beautiful. Where did you get them?  
They're Italian. You're not allowed to ask what they cost.  
He loved them; they were too good for what he'd been, but perfect for what he felt he was becoming.

When we're in bed on sunny afternoons, we'll be able to pull them over us and look up.

Let's try it.

They undressed.

They're ours. You're not allowed to share them with anyone else.

Laughing at the impossibility, they rushed to be together, stroking their cool lovers' bodies, warming.

Kiss my breasts.

They lost the afternoon in each other.

Please can I have some tea?

She went outside to wait for him.

I'm going to buy you a tray.

Don't spend too much on me.

I want to. I want you to tell me why you emptied the house. I want to be here all the time. I can't, but I want to. You won't let anyone else come here, will you?

He shook his head.

Are you sure you don't want someone else?

I couldn't possibly have anyone else.

I think I've got next weekend organised. You can take me to your bush house.

She touched him.

Love of loves.

In his excitement, he felt a strand of doubt, of caution.

What is it, darling?

I've got this fear that it's all going to blow up. When other people find out, for instance.

They'll find out in good time. Bugger them, we're going on.

He smiled, feeling weak, admiring her determination.

You're not used to taking risks.

He nodded, accepting.

They think I'm taking photos. Well, I will be. But a couple of weeks later I'll have to take the family there.

He nodded.

You don't mind?

You can have anything you like from me.

Love is the most precious thing. Made of ourselves, and of another, it transfigures both. It is the best of earthly states, and never far from being the worst.

Say what you want, darling.

I'm all caught up in you. I'm out of control. I'm so full of energy and I'm so much in love I could do anything. But my big blazes don't last. I want to translate this – us – into something we can live with. I want to make a life that's got us at the centre.

The trees had their doubts. The daisies started to wonder.

But I don't want to break things down. I've made a house for my kids. Even Tony treats it with respect at times, though he's so clumsy it makes me angry.

You must have been in love when you married.

I was. And I thought I could control him. But I was wrong on both counts. I don't want him near me any more, and he doesn't take his bearings from me these days, he takes them from the last person he talked to. I wish he'd go away.

The trees were disturbed. Senior mountains, feeling that this conversation, so important to the humans, was irritating, rumbled angrily.

Do you think we should go back to the car?

No, let's sit it out and see what happens.

The words, hanging in the air, made them look at each other. Were they talking about the weather, or themselves?

Did we just make a decision?

I think we did.

The plateau approved. The wise old trees thought it was the best they could do. The daisies asked for and received a shaft of light. The immovable rocks called on the winds for a gesture of support, and the air became still.

We're so alone. Do you feel in danger, darling?

If you mean us, yes. If you mean something happening to us here, no. I could die here, and not care at all.

Why darling?

I feel that if I died here, then I'd be going back to where we must all have come from. We're nothing, then we're alive, then we're dirt again, rather nasty dirt, in the ground. Up here, I feel in touch with all other life. I feel limitless. If I could be dissolved into all this, I'd be happy to go. Nothing would have been lost.

The snowgrass tussocks didn't care for what he was saying. They didn't want his bones lying around.

I'd have lost you, darling. I couldn't bear it.

Then what I've been saying is silly. I couldn't go away from you either, and I'm not into suicide pacts or melodrama like that. I suppose I think we owe it to life to let it have its way with us, and being here with you, although it makes me feel exalted, makes me also accept that there's an end.

Some theatrical clouds moved around the edge of this dialogue, swirling their capes of rain. A short-circuit in the celestial wiring caused some startling flashes, yet the noises that followed them, very loud, perhaps, at their point of origin, were pianissimo tympani by the time they rolled up the Chinese mountain. A flirtatious breeze ruffled her fair, curly hair.

Someone up there loves you, young lady.

Why are you crying, darling?

This is a point of perfection for you. It's an absolute. It's a point of perfection for me too, but it's not an absolute, not final. It's a point we're passing through. There are no absolutes. We just like to pretend there are by using words like kingdom or ...

She was momentarily afraid to say it.

... death.

It struck him hard.

God. Extinction. Those things are not absolutes. They're part of a process whereby everything is done away with, to be replaced by something new. If we commit ourselves to this process we're subverting our own position. If we don't commit ourselves to it we're swept away anyhow. It's a no-win situation. So you have to align yourself with what's going to do away with you. For a woman, that means that the child is more important than the adult, even though—isn't this stupid—the child will eventually become an adult.

He felt that what she'd said would become a decision one day.

The rocks kept very quiet. The birds chose not to approach.

She took his hand.

I think I've frightened you. Don't be frightened. I could never do anything to hurt you.

The mountain felt it was time to help.

Some of my friends are waiting for you. See them over there?

They made their way down the grassy incline, sliding on their bottoms. Soon they were at the bulldozer track, then the rocky way. Soon they were at the car.

Goodbye mountain.

Take care, gentle people. Come back if you can.

Lovers don't come back. They have to go on. They're as subject to time as everyone else, never more than when they forget it in their moment of release. The time and energy they stole from the universe will have to be paid back one day, but lovers rarely worry about such things, because they are in a state of release. Their selves are not left behind, not even subjugated, or not exactly, but given a soaring freedom. Lovers rise, circle, meet. They find a vast simplicity, a place where

they look down on all. The underlying requirement of the universe is that they expend themselves for and with each other. Their exhaustion is as happy as their rush to possess. The mystical nature of their situation is not that they have moved aside to contemplate the world they inhabit, but that they have rendered themselves to its purposes. The lover is rushed along by forces he or she is willing to accept, obedient to the strongest simplicity of life: give yourself, and create another. Their child, if a child is produced, will then enslave the lovers who will turn into parents, until the child is old enough to repeat the cycle ... and the world will go on. I said earlier that love is not unlike the mysterious realm described by practitioners of the perennial philosophy, with their aim for a mystical release which is also a form of finding oneself. Lovers spend themselves. Lovers, in opening themselves to life's most demanding forces, open themselves to each other. Your perennial philosopher may think that the self of the lover's lover, that realm now open for the many experiences of welcoming, hosting, sharing and/or invasion, is small by comparison with the space, the bliss offered by the shared divinity, but it is the best that most of us will ever get, and it offers the consolation prize that most of us, most lovers that is, have at least got some idea of where we are. That's no small consolation!

## Music (2)

Some of the music that is dearest to me now, at the age of seventy two, was discovered in my first reaching out for the wonderful tradition that European music provided. I have already named Don Adams and Vans Ovenden. They know not what they did. No doubt I, unknown to myself, have had effects on others I'm not aware of. I hope, earnestly of course, that these have been good.

Let's get back to music, starting with Heinrich Schutz (1585 – 1672), moving to Beethoven, well known to us all, and then to Anton Bruckner (1824 – 1896).

Don Adams introduced me to the Heinrich Schutz settings of the Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint John. They were in German, a language I hardly knew. Don told me to get a Bible and follow the stories in English; the texts were virtually identical. I did this. The settings could hardly have been simpler. The narrator sang the gospel story, Jesus and others sang their own words, and a small chorus took the words of any groups, such as the crowd that calls for Barabbas, not Jesus, to be released. After years of attending Anglican services I knew all this very well, and had heard endless sermons about what was being said and done. Schutz, one hundred years earlier than J.S. Bach, was every bit as committed to what he was setting. It was the story of God coming to earth in human form, and he told it in the simplest possible way because the story was of such obvious eloquence that it needed almost nothing to make its marvel apparent. So thought Schutz: his music was unaccompanied and of great economy. Listening to his settings was my first encounter with that important principle which says that less is more.

In later years I discovered that the younger Schutz had studied in Italy and had written motets after the style of the Gabriellis, Venetians who wrote music of sonorous splendour, which Schutz had emulated until his development took him in another direction. As an old man (he wrote the John and Matthew Passions at eighty and eighty one) he cut back, forcing himself to write with such sparseness that the listener became something close to the accompanist. It might be said that the only accompaniment to the late passions of Schutz is faith, and, in the case of his Christmas Story, another late work, delight in the story being told. These works take place on an exalted plane, and I suppose that while they themselves are capable of lifting listeners to the plane where they can be understood, they work better if the listener arrives full of faith already.

I am writing after years of listening to this music but if I take myself back to the time when I was getting to know the Passions, I find myself surprised at my readiness to grasp the spirituality of these works, written in complete submission to and acceptance of a faith which I myself had recently given up. I think my own experience (of Schutz, and others) was a classic case of shedding the faith but proceeding with the emotional and spiritual matters which the faith entailed. It was as if I kept on learning and thinking in a Christian way even after I had rejected the particular ideas which had given the thinking its flavours and directions.

If this seems odd, then I can only say that most things are odd in some way or other, and I'm intensely grateful for all I've learned in following the paths opened up by Heinrich Schutz in his 87 years. He lost his wife Magdalene when he was forty, and he seems to have made his remaining years a reflection on what the Christian church, with its eyes half, or even most, of the time on heaven, called life on earth. The music, and this means his reflection too, grew ever simpler, more austere, and broad in its implications. He was quite a model for a young man not yet aware that he would try to lead a life in art in a world that wasn't inclined the same way.

As stated earlier, I had separated myself from the Christian faith by the time I became aware of Heinrich Schutz, and I bring him into this discussion not so much as an example of mystical awareness, though that would be a fair assessment of his later music, but by way of reminding

myself and others that such awareness may come as a bolt from the blue, as the saying goes, but it may also be an outcome of an organised and systematised faith, in this case a Christian one. It may be said that our minds are essentially alone and unsupported in a black and swirling universe, but they work better if we create systems of thought inside which they can operate, and a religious faith is such a system. It's easier to know where you are if you surround yourself with pointers of various sorts, and above all stories to refer to. The Christian faith has many of these, especially stories. The gospels are clusters of stories and each and every one of them is by now loaded with meanings. Remember the New Testament habit of explaining events by saying that they fulfilled a prophecy made centuries before; present time is supported by an underlay of thinking that goes far back, long ago ...

For all that Christ's words in the Schutz Passions are solemn and given to a bass, it is the tenor narrator who carries the ecstatic message that the story of Jesus he is unfolding makes God's intentions clear on earth. The tenor resembles the great roses of glass in the cathedrals, at once telling a story and revealing that other world, so near and so far: ever-present. Schutz's tenor-narrator makes his message ring!

Now let us turn to Beethoven, Ludwig Van, 1770 – 1827, a figure who seems to stand at the beginning of the modern world, whatever we may mean by that!

Beethoven established himself in the Vienna that knew Haydn and Mozart but by the end of an extraordinary life had changed music in ever so many ways; I want to discuss two of them, and it is the second that is most important to the argument of this book, even though most people would say that it is the first of his two great explorations which has most to do with spirituality. For convenience's sake let me remind the reader at this point that in the last years of his life Beethoven spent enormous energies on two works that he wrote at the same time, one beside the other, the 9th symphony with its choral finale, and the Missa Solemnis, a setting of the Catholic mass.

He was also (when he wasn't setting Scottish folk songs!) writing his last piano sonatas and string quartets, and numerous analysts have remarked on these sonatas and quartets as having an inward quality which no music before or since has possessed. It is as if something in the composer had told him that his city, Vienna, would in another century be famous as the centre for analysis of the mind and the mysterious processes of the unconscious. It is not at all clear to me that our thinking, today, about the mind and its ways is much further advanced than it was in 1827 when Beethoven lifted his fist above his death bed in response to thunder rumbling overhead, but be that as it may, most commentators on Beethoven concentrate on the increasing inwardness of the music he wrote as his separation developed: this is normally ascribed to his deafness although, accepting that it must have played a part, I think that it was the man's underlying nature coming out as he matured.

Against, or in contrast with, the Beethoven whose introspections gave rise to strangely and wonderfully wrought works for which he is justly revered, there is another line in his development which is largely overlooked, or regarded as secondary, but which I wish to draw attention to in my discussion of spirituality because Beethoven, as so often, sheds new light. I am referring to that line of musical thought which runs from the Fantasy for piano, choir and orchestra, Opus 80, to the 9th symphony, with its famous finale. Anyone who hears the Choral Fantasy notices that its later stages are a try-out, a practice-run, for the great moment in the 9th when the Ode to Joy theme murmurs in the orchestra, a moment of exultation, known to the world, and played when the Berlin Wall came down and the two Germanies reunited. 'Oh my friends!' sings the bass, calling on the world to sing a song of joy. It's great stuff, but Beethoven had already heard it stirring in his mind, quite a few years earlier, and it is in the earlier work that we can see that he has found his public theme, as opposed to the inner preoccupations of his quartets and sonatas, and though his public statements are fewer in number than his inner works, they keep cropping up in the years that followed

the Choral Fantasy. Try the King Stephen overture, or the last couple of minutes of the Diabelli Variations for piano, and see what you think. Beethoven had a number of supporters among the Viennese aristocracy, and he was grateful enough to them, but he found it hard to stomach a class of beings who assumed an innate superiority over the lesser humans layered below them.

Aristocracy stuck in Beethoven's craw, though he had to swallow often enough. Something democratic, something egalitarian in his spirit was struggling to be free, and almost everybody who hears the 9th symphony recognises that it is their freedom that Beethoven is singing about, writing about, imagining, because, artist that he is, he knows that victories are won in the imagination before they can triumph anywhere else. The 9th symphony is regarded as one of the greatest statements ever made for liberation. It's an ode to joy but the joy as everyone knows is really freedom. Freiheit! The idea sings, in Beethoven's setting, unsullied by political manoeuvring, dirty tricks, dictators and/or the popular press. Ideas can stay fairly clean at the time of their beginnings!

Yet my subject is the *Missa Solemnis*, and it was written, as I said, at the same time as the last of his symphonies, opus 123 (the mass) and 125 (the symphony). Although, naturally, there is much more singing in the mass, the forces are the same: orchestra, choir, four soloists. The works are much the same in length, and also in scope, or scale. Here's what Huxley<sup>(7)</sup> said about the mass:

There is, at least there sometimes seems to be, a certain blessedness lying at the heart of things, a mysterious blessedness, of whose existence occasional accidents or provenances (for me, this night is one of them) make us obscurely, or it may be intensely, but always fleetingly, alas, aware. In the *Benedictus* Beethoven gives expression to this awareness of blessedness. His music is the equivalent of this Mediterranean night, or rather of the blessedness at the heart of the night, or the blessedness as it would be if it could be sifted clear of irrelevance and accident, refined and separated out into its quintessential purity.

Huxley selected the *Benedictus* as the centre of his discussion of the mass, and I have done the same in giving this book its title; but, since I want to change this focus in my discussion, let's deal with the *Benedictus* first, and then move on.

There is a moment in a mass – any mass – when the bread and wine are lifted up for the congregation to see. This is the moment when, according to the church, bread and wine change to become the body and blood of Christ. The divine comes down to earth to sanctify earth's produce and turn it into something else. Beethoven sets this unforgettably, with a violin floating down accompanied by two oboes, an angel and two lesser, earthly figures, servants, perhaps. When the spirit has reached earth, the lesser beings withdraw. Voices murmur 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the lord', and the movement is underway. It rises, falls, soars, meditates, drifts, and pauses at times for reflection. A mind has brought itself out of the firmament to contemplate the earth. Nothing it sees – not in this movement, though the *Agnus Dei* is different – disturbs it. It's serene from beginning to end, and it dies away in peace. This is Beethoven at his greatest, but it's worth remembering that he set out originally to compose a mass for the installation of his friend the Archduke Rudolph as Archbishop of Olmütz. Composition of the mass was protracted, to use a euphemism, and the work was far from finished when the Prince was installed. It was another two and a half years before Beethoven had his mass finished. Only then could it be performed. One has only to put this individualism of Beethoven's alongside the servitude of earlier composers of church music to see how unthinkable Beethoven's attitudes would have been for them. Whatever the occasion may have been, Beethoven was writing for himself, not for the church nor even his friend Prince Rudolph. To be blunt, the mass would say what Beethoven wanted it to say.

It's now time to look at some other parts of the mass (the *Benedictus* ringing in our ears!).

Beethoven is very responsive to words. Every section of the *Gloria* and the *Credo* takes its character from the ideas in contemplation. In the *Gloria* we hear the words 'miserere nobis' (have mercy upon us) several times, and as the music develops Beethoven gives his singers an intrusive

‘O’: ‘O miserere nobis’. The effect is to alter what has been until then in the history of mass-setting a ritualistic, formulaic utterance and make it a personal plea. The voices are singing on behalf of themselves, not as participants in a ritual conducted by the only authorised intermediary with God. One might claim that the utterances of ‘O’ are Protestant as opposed to Catholic, but this is not quite right, in my mind. Mankind, I think Beethoven is saying, can speak for itself, and furthermore it’s going to!

This tiny, though significant addition to the words of the mass is followed up at the end of the same movement, when, after one of the most protracted and complex settings of ‘Amen’ that had ever been heard, Beethoven decided, symphonically perhaps, and also in his role as spokesman for mankind, to return to the opening of the movement. Gloria! sings his choir. Gloria! There is a last chord from the orchestra, then Gloria! again, unaccompanied. Humanity has the last word, and it’s an exultant one. Gloria, not amen. The Church has contributed the words and the traditions they embody, but mankind is making everything new. Beethoven senses that a new age is dawning and his singers are singing its arrival. Gloria! With a few minutes of music capped by a gesture typical of the man, he has wrested the initiative from the church and handed it to humanity, even though the words are much the same as they’ve always been.

He makes a similar change at the end of the Benedictus. This normally concludes with a repeat of the words ‘Hosanna in excelsis’, but Beethoven, after giving these exciting words a reprise, returns to his notion of blessedness embodied in the meditations of the solo violin. It’s the violin and the notion of blessedness – à la mankind in a spiritual body, by contrast with the mass of mankind in the 9th symphony, where, trembling with joy and hope, it stands on the edge of political action or at least awareness – it’s the violin, embodying blessedness, which soars above the message traditionally given by the church in their established order of words. How strange that Beethoven should use a setting of the mass to make his strongest secular statement, for that is what it is: the blessedness which it was once in the province of the church to offer or withhold is now available to all. This returns me to the violin, with its memorable entry. Is it really the holy spirit coming down, as traditionally conceived, or is it the human spirit realising a part of itself which has always been there but is only now, in Beethoven’s hands, coming within reach of all? Listen to the music as often as you will, the violin will only tell you what its notes have been written to say: the rest is not silence, as Aldous Huxley told us, but is an interpretation which we must make for ourselves and ‘we’, as I use it here, means humanity as so generously, magnificently, conceived by possibly the most adventurous composer who ever lived.

What of Anton Bruckner? He was a socially inept man who hardly knew how to live outside the world of the church. Friends and musical experts told him his symphonies needed editing, which was done for him by men who felt they knew. His symphonies would seem to be dated now, and to have no place in the modern world, but, strangely, they live on and it seems to us today that the simple man had something monumental about him which easily outlasts the more sophisticated thoughts of those who laughed at him. I bring Anton Bruckner into this writing because of the adagio of his 8th symphony, one of those half-hour movements for which he is notorious. What does it mean? I’ve listened to it any number of times and I’m still not sure, but I’ll set down my thoughts in an attempt to make them relevant to my discussion of spirituality, blessedness, and so on.

The opening of the movement takes us back, yet again, to the vision locked in the stained glass of the cathedrals’ rose windows, and that feeling of closeness, of immanence, which the windows give. The composer begins with a haunting, distant theme, ever so close, ever so far away. The whole movement is, I think, an attempt to reach that state of loftiness, of blessedness, which the opening implies. As the music, the movement, grows in confidence the attainment of this goal seems increasingly possible. Then something happens, the confidence turns into a noisy striving, that which should float easily into the upper reaches of one’s mind seems to need grasping for, and in the grasping, it’s lost. Bruckner offers us a mighty discord with every note on the scale played

at the same time. The key system, that notional embodiment of order since the days of J.S. Bach, has broken down. Bruckner, or mankind, if you want to put it in Beethoven's terms, is helpless. Heaven has ways of its own, however. The lofty music of the opening returns quietly, floating high above, far away, and as close as ever. Attainable only by being unattainable. Not to be grasped, but always to be known, because always on offer to souls of great humility. Bruckner finds peace by admitting his helplessness. Heaven smiles on him because he confesses that he's nothing. The music dies away, and we know, as it ends, that we have been present at a revelation. We know not to ask too much for ourselves, but to be content to let revelation come when it will, and that is not in our hands.

I have invoked these masters of the spiritual in music in the hope that they can help us with our own search, which continues in the sections that follow. Before you read them, why don't you go and play some music? Heinrich Schutz, the *Missa Solemnis*, the mighty adagio, they're all there, always and forever ... waiting for you, for me, for us, to learn ...

## 2nd interlude: Enchantment

I'm going to talk about Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*. I've read this play almost as many times as I've listened to the music by Beethoven, Schutz and Bruckner that I was discussing in the previous essay, and yet I know how hopelessly I would perform if compelled to sit at a table and deal with exam questions on its text. Why is this? I think it's because the 'text', a restrictive term used in the previous century as a means of limiting the imagination, doesn't so much release meanings, in this play, as it releases surges of the imagination, and these, as everyone knows, dart all over the place, doing all sorts of things ...

... as Ariel does. What a creation! 'My tricky spirit!' says Prospero, and we know the play has an inner voice, or dialogue, between the greatest of writers and his own imagination, his art, his burden, his responsibility and his joy ... call it what you will. Shakespeare, for the purpose of his play, has divided his powers, divided himself into two halves: one will return to Milan, where 'every third thought shall be my grave', and the other, Ariel, Prospero's 'chick', has to produce calm seas and auspicious gales, and then to the elements he'll be free. Question 1! Where is Ariel when the audience is returning home after the performance? That's right, where is he, and does the location you ascribe to him make any difference to those other people, using the same roads, trains, planes or footpaths as the audience on their way home, who didn't see the play? Question 2. Does Ariel exist outside the minds of those who see him in the theatre and believe, therefore, that he exists?

Question 3. Can Ariel exist without Prospero, or must he find a new master, or return, perhaps, to the cloven pine where he had been confined by the foul witch Sycorax, and wait for another Prospero to give purpose to his life. Discuss!

Pens down, please. You can write your answers later. I wish to take my argument a little further.

For a start, here's Question 4. The play opens with a storm. Where is this storm happening? Who caused it, and why? How is it that Miranda, Prospero's daughter, thinks that she saw the ship's crew and passengers drowned, but a moment later (Act I, Scene 2) believes her father when he tells her that the ship and everyone on it are safe and sound?

You think the 4th question is easy? I'm tempted to let you write for a while, but no, I'll go on. One of the reasons why *The Tempest* is so difficult to analyse is that it's hard to find any firm ground for its consideration. That is to say that most people, if they have a wish to consider something, choose a vantage point, which can be made known and then considered. The advantage of this, the benefit, is that anyone coming along later can evaluate the thing seen against the position from which it is seen.

What I am talking about here does, I think, have relevance for the consideration of mysticism that I have undertaken in these essays. Bear with me, if you can.

I am talking about *The Tempest*, and I am looking for the vantage point from which it may best be seen. This is not easy to find, and there is a reason.

Shakespeare's last play tells a story, and for most stories there is a given. For example:

'An Englishman, a Scotchman and an Irishman were shipwrecked on an island ...' You're listening, and you smile. You have been given the given of what's to come. From the cupboard in your brain where you store clichés, you pull out an Englishman, a Scotchman and an Irishman, their faces worn featureless by all the gags they've been used in. 'Yes?' you say, ready for whatever's next ...

Please note that at this point you cannot interrupt the story to say, 'No! I insist these men must be French, Russian and Chinese!' If you do this, you're wrecking the story before it starts. A good

listener accepts the given. Suitable listeners know what has to be contributed and do it willingly.

‘Yes! An Englishman, a Scotchman and an Irishman. What happened?’

Let’s move ourselves to the great piazza in front of Saint Peter’s, in Rome. Are you listening?

‘Well, it seems ...’

*It seems:* aha! There’s a story being told.

‘... that the Pope was out one day, moving around in his Pope-mobile ...’

Yes! A funny little thing, and the Pope inside it, waving ...

‘... when he saw this beautiful young tourist get out of a bus. He took a look at her, and he thought this is a bit of all right ...’

The Pope? Wow! Go on!

‘... and he thought how’m I going to get her inside, and no one hanging around to interrupt?’

Notice that we are dealing with clichés here. The beautiful young tourist is An Object Of Desire. Her role, thus far, is simple. (She hasn’t opened her mouth!) The Pope is a contradiction. He’s not supposed to have a thought below the navel and he’s got his eye on this girl. What’s going to happen?

A story starts with its given or givens, there are listeners who want to know what’s going to happen next, and there is a narrator who will tell them. Simple, isn’t it? Not in *The Tempest*. Was there a storm? We thought so. Miranda saw it, and she thought the ship sank and everyone on board was drowned. Not so, says her dad, and he’s not even wearing his magic mantle. He tells Miranda how they came to be on the island; that is, he gives her her given, and she asks him, ‘And now, I pray you sir/For still ‘tis beating in my mind; your reason/For raising this sea-storm?’ He tells her that his enemies have been brought to his shore, and then he puts her to sleep. Miranda, and the audience at the performance, have been given all the given that they’re going to get, and it isn’t very informative. In fact, the thought crosses our minds that since the people on the ship have been deceived then maybe Prospero (and is or isn’t he Shakespeare; we’re not sure) is deceiving us too. The play reveals itself as being in fairly large measure about deception, and the reader/listener can’t be certain where he or she stands (or sits) in this. We can laugh at those being set up for us to laugh at, but there is a suspicion in the mind of anyone reading or watching this play that some of the amusement may be at our expense, too. ‘Lord, what fools these mortals be!’

Question 5. Summarise the main events of this play, and for every thing mentioned, indicate how it came about, both on stage and in the ‘real’ events depicted. Pay particular attention to the question of how much Prospero in the last scene is or is not the same Prospero who speaks the Epilogue.

Pens down a little longer, dear readers; I want you to join me in Act II, Scene 2. This is where Trinculo creeps under the gaberline of Caliban, who is trying to avoid what he thinks must be a spirit sent to punish him, and lies flat on the ground. In comes Stephano, with a bottle, and, having sung a song or two and had a drink or two, he imagines – everything is imagined in this play – that he is dealing with a monster possessing four legs and two voices. It’s a crazy scene in which Shakespeare at his greatest creates a foible-filled version of mankind. With the generosity of drunks, Stephano pours wine into one of the creature’s mouths, only to hear its other mouth call him by name. He’s dealing with a devil, not a monster, and decides that he ‘will leave him, I have no long spoon.’

Let us be in no doubt that the playwright is giving us one view, one possible view, of humanity. We are quite a way from Beethoven, Schutz and Bruckner now! There’s nothing on the other side of those rose windows but monsters, warfare, lust, torture, all the greed and brutality for which mankind is renowned. What a history this creature has! No sooner does it do something marvellous, something magical, than its worst elements break out all over again, and one is forced

to the conclusion that the redemption so commonly, so relentlessly sought by European minds either doesn't happen or if it does it's contradicted, swiftly, even immediately, by its opposites, every time.

And yet, on the same island, Ferdinand and Miranda are falling in love. She sees him carrying the firewood that her father has told him to pile up. Seventy lines later, Shakespeare being who he is, and he's no waster of time, and this is a play full of magic, they have taken each other by the hand. Prospero, looking on, says:

So glad of this as they I cannot be,  
Who are surpris'd withal; but my rejoicing  
At nothing can be more.

The uncertainty surrounding the play, and the fact that the audience doesn't really know what rules, if any, constrain its action, are steadily being dealt with. The audience is being taught to wonder. At what? The play has two answers – the magical availability to Prospero and Ariel of everything the imagination can produce (mankind at its richest), and the baseness, the foulness and the contradictions of mankind at its worst. The truest magic, the most lasting effect of the enchantment of this play is that both lots of forces, the best and the worst of humankind, are set loose in the same play. The Christian god, the Christian world-view, is nowhere to be seen.

The audience is being taught to wonder. This can only happen when wondrous things occur before their eyes. Enter Juno, Ceres, and 'certain nymphs'. Nor can we forget the language of the play. A plain-spoken vernacular would not serve. If we are to entertain the fantastical with our minds we must be in the frame of mind to do so, though the word 'frame' hardly suits, here: frames contain, and the language of this play dazzles and delights: even Caliban has speeches beyond the powers of kings and queens in earlier plays. It all takes place on a magic isle, and that realisation goes some of the way to explaining the insecurity – the insubstantiality, perhaps – of the meagre sort of 'given' that we're given to get our understandings started. The island is the home of Ariel, and was the home of Sycorax, who brought Caliban into the world, ugly as he is. Prospero and Miranda are late arrivals, and they are soon to leave, with Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand the outward sign of reconciliation between the much wrong'd Prospero and the world that did him in, years before. When the play ends, Prospero gives Ariel his freedom, and when he comes out to speak his epilogue, his magic's gone. He describes the island where he lived for years as 'bare', though it was far from bare in the action of the play we've seen. So the play is about possessing magic, and letting it go, and the uses of magic while one has it in one's hands, so to speak. Magic is accessible to the evil men, too; it overpowers them, and when it creates visions to entrance their eyes, they believe, as they are intended to do, until the banquet before them disappears, and they, like Prospero at the end of the play, are left as the limited and rather undesirable mortals they habitually are.

So mankind, in this play, is shown as the fairly brutal mob that Christianity describes, but the redemption, such as it is, in this play comes from magic: enchantment, skilfully used to bring about ...

... what? A wedding, a restitution, a righting of wrongs, a replacement of an old order by a new one, and a rebirth of hope, that great necessity for humans, all brought about by magic, by enchantment (and we, the audience, had to be enchanted too, to believe that it was happening there before us). All of the above, but notice that Prospero has to leave his magic on the island. The Prospero who comes out to speak his epilogue says to us:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint:

He's found, and perhaps he knew this before he made full use of his powers, as we've seen him do, that he is like the bee which can only sting once. Everything had to go according to plan, and it has, but if it hadn't, then his powers of enchantment would have been lost because they, above all powers, must be believed in before they can work.

This, I think, is why I had, on an earlier page, so much trouble setting out the given of this play. If you think I was wasting my time in trying to cope with this question, let me put a proposal to you. Get a group of people who know *The Tempest* and ask them for a synopsis of what happens; you may be surprised at the variety of their answers. What does happen in the play? Well, it starts with a storm, and it ends with a reconciliation of some sort, and Prospero's changed, and Ariel's gone, but in between? You'll get as many answers as you have people in your group. An enchanted crowd cannot fail to give different accounts; it's the very nature of the experience. Years ago I asked a Catholic friend, 'Do you believe in the resurrection (of Jesus Christ)?' He thought, then said, 'Something happened.' I admired his answer and I'm borrowing it to describe *The Tempest*. Quite a lot happens, but what's it all about?

No amount of logic will answer the question because everything that's done in the play, and that includes the experiences of those who are there, watching, not to mention those who are delivering its words, everything that happens is the result of an enchantment so profound that Prospero and Ariel, who are making things happen, are somehow less than the forces they are unleashing. When the storm is made to abate, it's only so that other forces, just as great, can replace them. It's as if, briefly, and in one place only – the magic island – the forces of the swirling, unimaginably mysterious universe are controlled and shaped to bring about particular ends.

And when this is done, as we see at the end, Prospero's exhausted and Ariel's free again. The transfigurative power of magic can't be expected to turn into a daily work-horse, bringing a miracle every morning. Can it?

Er ...

Can it?

Answer. We can't be sure. We never really know.

My book is about the perennial philosophy, as Aldous Huxley called it, and I think readers will have seen by now that I am no more than shallowly experienced and/or knowledgeable on the matter. I am, however, interested in everything that mankind does when s/he goes to the edge of the mind, all those manifestations of what our minds can and can't get a grip on when they try. The reader may have noticed also that I am a sceptic, and that I don't really believe in divinities out there, and would not, for myself, ever have claimed that even the best parts of myself or those I've known well enough to love, are divine. I just don't believe it, but I'm well aware that every phenomenon is capable of being understood in a variety of ways and that if you see the divine where I don't, then I don't wish to argue. Let's see our difference as an opportunity where your perception may produce a better outcome than mine.

As my friend of years ago might have said, 'Something happens!'

Last question, and this is for me to answer, not you, though I don't mind if you have a go at it too. Last question. If the world can be transfigured, if the imagination, acted upon by enchantment, can actually change the way everything works, even if it's only for a limited time, what does that say about the logic of the everyday? Has it any value? Any truth? Will it hold?

I shall do my best to tackle that question in the last of these essays. Before that, however, I'll turn to the spirituality of the land.

## Spirituality of the land

Many years ago, at home for Xmas on the family farm, I was tending the fire under Mother's copper (she'd changed all the sheets, and was bringing the dirty ones to the boil), when my Aunt Olly came up. She was curious about the effects of university on her brother's son. 'What are you interested in, Ches?' I was fond of Aunt Olly, and I was more or less tied to the copper, so I had plenty of time to answer. I said I was interested in all the things I was studying – history, literature, French, and so on. I was very interested in music. I was interested in traditions, and how they affected us. How useful they could be, and also how they could get in the way of new thinking. After a while I thought I should inquire, in return, 'And what about you, Aunt? What are you interested in?'

Olly said at once, 'The land. I like nothing better than looking at country. Driving around is good because you can see more of it. You can see what it'll do and what it won't.'

I had trouble with this answer: trouble being polite, I think I mean, because I was at a stage when nothing was more boring to me than the land. The land? Christ! All my family, the Eagle side of it, was on the land, and although I admired them and knew, even then, that I'd absorbed a great deal from them, I had no intention of spending my life doing things the Eagles did. Tractors, oranges, sheep. Straining fences. Pick and shovel work. Binder twine. Getting engines to start. Dogs, cattle, horses, irrigating. Watching the weather and talking about it, every day, with everyone this side of the black stump and the other side too. 'When's it gonna rain?' And when it rained, 'When's it gonna stop?'

The land? No. Please. No. Please. No.

How tedious.

The change began when I was given a job, teaching, in Gippsland, and made my way east. Though it was summer, the grass by the road was green, and this was new to me. There were mountains, and lakes, I'd heard. We seemed to be close to the sea, and this also was new to me. In the years that followed I came to understand how Gippslanders related to their landscape, and what a complete and to some extent self-contained system it was. I looked at it from the sea, on fishing trawlers. I flew along its coast in a small plane. I drove all over it, in my little VW. I studied its contours with maps. I listened to everybody who knew anything about it. I walked. I climbed fire towers, and I learned to identify the species of trees. Mountain ash normally grew on the shaded, southern sides of ridges, and then only if the soil was deep, and moist. Grass trees (*xanthorrhoea*) grew on the dry, rocky northern sides, or down near the water, on sand. Farmers knew that certain species indicated they'd get good soil, if they cleared, while other species told them the land was poor. No matter that the trees of poverty were more beautiful; they weren't interested in aesthetics!

I came, slowly enough, to the realisation that what grew on the surface, what you saw as you walked about, was an eloquent expression, though of what, exactly, I would have found hard to say. There were areas, not far from the lakes, where claypans, dominated by redgum, alternated with sandy rises, where stringybark and banksia grew. Something – an ocean long-receded, perhaps – had shaped the land this way, and what grew out of the land, what covered it, was its expression. I discovered, driving about, that the roughest, rockiest places were often the best endowed. Something in nature responded to a challenge. Conditions that looked almost impossible hosted dainty little things in flower. There were systems, plants that liked each other's company, as humans would say, and any number of tiny creatures in the air and burrowing in the ground. Farmers imposing their monocultures were simplifying complexities they were barely capable of under-

standing, and yet, of course, they sometimes understood quite well. Good farmers were observant; they might say things like, 'The ants are building their nests higher. It's going to rain!' How true, how informative these observations were I never had any idea, though I was, as usual, sceptical. It's best to be that way, I thought then and still think, most of the time.

Let me go back to the contrast between the white settlers' monocultures and the huge variety of the bush. Farmers had to do something that gave them a livelihood in an economy shaped by forces originating in other places. To do so in any given place, they had to overcome it. As usual, the struggle to conquer gave understandings, and sometimes, alas, it revealed ignorance and foolishness on a gigantic scale. I am thinking of the mountain ash forests of South Gippsland, among the finest forests in the world, which were destroyed by selectors trying to create farms, the majority of which they would later abandon. To compare what they left when they walked out with the forests they walked into is to see the almost limitless stupidity of humans when they impose rather than understand. Why do I bring in this sorry tale?

Because understanding is possible, and it means reaching out for an awareness of the way everything interacts, and each species is dependent on others. Human superiority is a human idea. Other species do well to be wary of us, so destructive are we, but inferiority is not something they've inbuilt, apart from the creatures we've tamed for our self-serving purposes. This awareness of ourselves as only one of the contenders in a dangerous and unstable ecology requires the human mind to stretch itself as far as it can: a satisfactory awareness of everything in the world beside ourselves requires not only effort, discipline and imagination, but also something comparable with the greater awareness of the mystic. A large claim? Yes, but it's one I wish to maintain in this piece.

Let me go on before I try to substantiate what I've said.

After a few years in Gippsland I made trips that returned me to New South Wales. I'd learned to wonder at the mountains, now I came back to the plains with fresh eyes, and found them wonderful too. I was interested in painting by this time and had a friend, a painter, who'd visited me in Gippsland and driven around, looking for places to paint. After a long time of searching without satisfaction, he announced, more or less to the windscreen he was peering through, 'I'm looking for a landscape with nothing in it.'

He'd have been happy in the country where I'd come from, and the country beyond that. In the inland there were places that had been settled, after a fashion, and places beyond them. Further out. Back of ... where everything was drier, and survival more difficult. You learned to watch the flight of birds because they knew where things were, especially water. From aeroplanes you could see how streams meandered across the land, dividing, subdividing, joining again before further separations. Trees followed water, fish swam in the water, birds had their flight paths around and across the streams. Red gums grew along the banks; black box grew further out. Then salt-bush. Kangaroos hopped across the plains, and pigs gone wild were dangerous if you came near. Everything took its place in a scheme in which land was the given and water the currency. Water and land, in an equation of some sort, equalled life, or the possibility thereof. I had grown up with this, but too closely, so had never understood it properly. Coming back to it after the mountains, rivers and lakes of Gippsland, it was suddenly clear. No doubt there were other systems too, waiting to be discovered, some of them in my own land, some of them in countries I hadn't seen.

Yet.

I realised how little I knew, and how shallow was my understanding of ecology. French, history, literature ... I began to feel humble. Aunt Olly was dead by this time so I couldn't apologise. I remembered Father sitting at our kitchen table, up on the farm, after he got back from long trips with stock agents to inspect sheep in other parts of the state. He'd trace the roads on the map of New South Wales with his hardened fingers, and tell me about the country in between the towns. Coonabarabran, Narrabri. The Pilliga Scrub. This was in the days when I thought these places

were by their very nature boring. Gunnedah, Narrandera. Nothing happened in these places! They were empty! I hadn't seen them but I'd seen any number of places that were like them, in fact the country was full of them; in fact it didn't have anything but boring places. Condobolin. West Wyalong. Dubbo, Orange, Gulargambone.

Spare me!

You could go to Cobar. There were sheep for sale in Bourke.

Enough. I'll spare you, even if the map of New South Wales didn't spare me. Yet, boring as it all sounded, I could see that Father had found some magic, some release, in driving through these places, and that with his fingers, tracing the roads he'd travelled, he was trying to recapture the feelings he'd had and pass them to his son. Years went by before I too would drive through these places and find them rich in event and contrast. I had to learn to look in new ways at the land, searching for every change as the car rushed along.

I had to change my idea of what constituted an event. In a constant, monotonous environment, I learned to see the first of a species of tree or flower, and the last. What had the white man done? What had been here before? If you had to walk everywhere, what would you find to eat, and drink? When would you move and when would you rest? What would you think about, or sing about, as you walked? What was there to catch, or dig up? How would you know the seasons of things' availability? If you had no books, nothing written down, how would you order your minds? There would be a challenge!

You would sense the moods of country, the underlying spiritual conditions. You would know the country that wanted you out, and the country that welcomed you. If your home was not a building, but a circuit, altering according to the seasons, you would arrive when you needed to and disappear for the same reason. Your group would be like a flock of birds, hovering, inspecting, feeding where you could, and moving on. You'd emerge from the trees like kangaroos, surprising anything that happened to be there, and you'd drift out of sight again. The rhythms of your life would be different from those of settled people. You'd live in an omniculture instead of a monoculture such as I grew up in. Your life would be physically austere and imaginatively rich, because the way of life would encourage the imagination instead of restraining it. You would need to be healthy and strong because there'd be no rooms available to cosset you, no silver salvers, only flesh and bone.

Eventually, as I have mentioned earlier in these pages, I travelled to Italy, Switzerland, Spain and France. I loved these places and felt that they had a superiority which I found daunting for some years. Eventually, again, I recovered my Australian sense of separation. I, and my country, had derived from European civilisation, but we'd had to find a way of our own. So locked in our European ways were we that we couldn't even see what the black people had had before us. In later years I discovered the tropics, with their wetlands, their islands large and small. I was taken to the great coral reef that flanks our continent. And later still, I flew into, and drove about, the centre. Coming late in life, it was like the discovery I'd made of Gippsland, years before. The centre was a place with ways and wonders of its own. Like much of Australia, it offered little accommodation to the white man, but this turned out to be an attraction: to get the best of it you had to realise your place in the scheme of things. Faced with the rocks, craters and ancient valleys of the centre, this wasn't hard. Climate change had made the centre a different place, not once but several times, and by extension the same had to be understood for the rest of the country. It had a unifying experience in its history, long before the settlers who came to it, first from Europe, then from the rest of the world. The best clue to this experience lay in the memories and adaptation of the black people, whose experience of the place had been much greater than the newcomers'. This was humbling. White superiority, European superiority, crumbled. Fell away. Amounted to no more than a hill of beans.

The mind hadn't reached its limits but the accumulated experience in the whitefellas' minds was insufficient to give them a decent understanding of where they were. A few years before I saw Uluru and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), I'd visited Le Mont Saint Michel, the gothic island off the coast of north-west France, and found it very moving. The buildings showed clearly enough the way the monks had lived. Their island sanctuary was a very special place. The monks had lived a little way – just a little way – apart from everyone else, but they did have boats and they did go fishing. One assumes they did some farming on the flat lands near their rock. They built their rooms, their kitchen, church and cloisters in and on the rock. Gothic steeples, as we know, reach for heaven, point to it, by way of reminder of where humanity should be directed. The whole island pointed up. This is a way of saying, metaphorically enough, that their lives were aspirational. They lived in the presence of their god. They freed themselves as much as they were able from the demands of this world, in favour of that other one they believed to be near. One can admire this devotion without wanting to imitate it, however. The very existence of a rule, a regime, a code of conduct, reflects, implies, a certain amount of doubt. To learn the rules of an order, and then to join it, is to admit that one's own consciousness is a little too heavy to bear. If I join an order it means that I can't bear to be me, alone. I must have company.

This is natural enough, but we are mistaken if we think that an order's rules, and a life lived in conformity with them, are necessarily more virtuous than a life lived in the general mayhem of humanity at large. Accidents, illness, unwanted children, the crimes and revenges of our unruly neighbours are always there to threaten us: it may be more virtuous to try to bring ourselves through an unruly world than to accept the discipline of a group that separates itself. I marvelled at Le Mont Saint Michel because it was as if something buried deep inside me had been discovered, centuries earlier, by those who lived on the sequestered isle: I found this part of myself and, having found it, I decided that I didn't want it. This is a little of what I wrote that night (9/2/1994):

Today I took the bus (an hour's drive) to Le Mont Saint Michel. The pictures and little statues of Saint Michael had him as a brilliant gold figure, trampling on and spearing a figure which I took to be the devil. Assuming I'm right, the statue reinforces one of my prejudices because it glorifies a figure making war on a despised aspect of human nature – those attributes which the church located in the figure who ruled the kingdom of evil. That the human race persistently does shocking things is apparent to us all, but the metaphor of defining the evil enemy as separate, and to be assaulted with frenetic violence, offends my increasingly quietist soul. Peace has to be sought within oneself, with self-understanding, great patience, and as full an awareness as possible of life's processes. I suppose I belong among those who think that abstention from sexuality, commerce, or the rigours of normal life, is not a good way to reach any sort of deeper understanding. One should always be aware of what it is one wants, and where one wants to go, but should rest easy – or otherwise – in the awareness that everything has to be known, seen, considered, and possibly experienced, before we can say we are beyond it, and ready for another stage.

Ending the same entry in my journal, I wrote:

... I found my way down into the humbler, though equally celebrated rooms. It was, and will always be, a truly remarkable place. Not as tenderly acceptable to me as the Moors' Alhambra at Granada, but certainly one of the great places of European civilisation ...

... like Bayreuth.

Which brings me to express, only very briefly, the effect these places have on me. Exposure is steadily burning the European out of me. I can still hear certain passages of Berlioz, Mozart, Bach and Beethoven (and you name it) and know that I will die without giving up what I found as a young man, but I also know that as I grow older I'll find less and less inspiration in Europe, and will find in the great spaces of my own country, haunted by the vestiges of a culture I hardly understand, more and more of the sustenance I need in the remainder of my life ...

... it's as if, here in Europe, wonderfully rich Europe, but so brutally, and blatantly concerned with itself, I'm taking in all the riches and they're having an antidotal effect. I don't want any more.

Europe is the dominant part of the human race which I ... I was going to say 'want to put behind me', but actually I want to sweep it out of the way. It's no use to me. It provides me with no way forward.

It doesn't even bring me to where I am tonight.

Rereading these words, I am a little surprised, as you may be too, at their vehemence, but I had been presented with the evidence of a fully worked-out way of life and it had caused me to feel, just as I had felt, many years earlier, when I lay in the paddocks and hoped the night sky would give me some sort of uplifting feeling, that what I had been considering was not something that was right for me. That, I would probably have said, had still to be considered.

I am not sure if I would have known – I might – in 1994 that the only deliverance I have ever discovered is in writing things down. When I'm writing I ask myself, 'What do I think?' and I wait for the depths of my mind to give up whatever they hold. It's the only way I can live at peace with myself. This must seem a long way from a young man telling his aunt what he's interested in, now that he's at university, and being surprised by her answer to his question. The land. Country. What it'll do and what it won't. Driving around to have a look. It seemed unambitious, to me, pedestrian. My history, literature, French and music told me about the riches of the human mind, the vast variety that had been produced by so many people in so many ways, and because I was young I wanted to know about all these things, and experience as many of them as I could. This is natural enough. It's no surprise that a young man should think that way. Young people, like the monks at Le Mont Saint Michel, expect that older, wiser people will have gone before them and set their discoveries down so that those who follow them need only obey.

I'm not built that way. Are you? I have to find out for myself. Don't you? I see you smiling. You are thinking about me. Does this man make his own clothes or does he go into a shop and buy something off the shelf? Socks from the drawer? Coat and trousers off the hook? You're right to smile. I do do what you say. But my thoughts must be home-made and the world seems complex and contradictory. Any sense I make of it will be my own. I'll borrow from other writers and thinkers but I'll put it together for myself because I have to. We all have to.

Don't you?

## Music (3)

Music takes us over. Many years ago I did military training at the Australian army's Puckapunyal camp, 'Pucka', a tradition for soldiers who'd been there during World War 2. I was scornful of the army – an interruption to my real life at university – but, late in our fourteen weeks, something happened which has stuck in my mind. The whole camp paraded in front of its most senior officer, and as the trainees marched off, giving him salute, and being saluted in return, a band played 'stirring' music for us to march to. The company of which I was a part approached the saluting point, and the band, then swung left. The music which had been muffled was suddenly clear. The regular army soldiers who were our instructors began to march with panache because we were passing under the eye of the camp commander. I let the music enter me and for the few moments it took to pass the officer, eyes right, I had no identity. I was, you might say, only a passing note. Twenty paces further on, I was as scornful, as detached, as before. As usual.

What had entered me? Answer, the military ethos, and it came in via the notes. Music is the most pervasive language and it takes us over easily. It does this via our feelings, our inner pulses, providing no words for the mind to argue with. It's not easy to defend oneself against music, as I'm sure you know. One of my pet hates is Frank Sinatra singing 'New York!', but I've only to hear it, on my car radio, or anywhere, and I'm hooked. Resist it as I may, it's there inside me, laughing at my inability to get rid of it. Frank has to finish before I'm free. 'You bloody gangster!', I say, but I know Frank's laughing in the stretch-mobile driving him away. 'Got you again!', he's thinking.

How can music enter us so easily? Ordinary language negotiates with us, coming from outside. Ordinary language is public, used by all. Ordinary language has rules of grammar, abused as they are in coarser speech, and it's regularised by dictionaries, defining the knowledge which ought to be, and often is, common. Music? Herbert von Karajan said that all a conductor did was make the music faster or slower, louder or softer. No more than that. He wasn't fooling anybody, least of all himself. Great conductors have a certain consciousness of music in their minds and they project it to the musicians in front of them. The gestures they make with their hands are only a response to this hidden, inner flow. The orchestra watches the hands but is connected to the mind.

Parenthetically I will mention the discussion of the relative importance of words and music when the two are combined. Richard Strauss wrote a whole opera (*Capriccio*) on this subject, and he wasn't the first. The two must combine, of course. There's nobody apart from the composer to settle the order of precedence. Indeed, if the question of precedence arises, the music won't be any good. (Try Schubert to see how it should be done.) Each must serve the other. But who's to serve what? Who's who and what's what?

Perhaps the best way to differentiate these two forms of language is to begin with the way they develop meanings. Words can be defined. Hence dictionaries. We can ask what a word means, and expect to be told. Words are combined into sentences, and the meaning is more complex. The cat sat on the mat! Sentences form paragraphs, paragraphs chapters, and chapters books. (I'm reading a lousy one at the moment.) Thoughts (ideas) can be developed into mighty structures and, of course, as soon as you start to do this you are encroaching on the zone of music because thoughts and ideas entail the feelings that go with them, and the two start to move along together. Music begins in the other dimension, of feeling, mood, association, and it too flows with a logic all its own, and it too, now and then, can suggest the other stream, that of language. You feel that the composer has certain thoughts in mind, even though there are no words. The best example I can think of is 'Must it be? It must be.' which Beethoven wrote over certain bars in the last movement of his last quartet. You don't have to know the words are there to hear the question and answer in

the music. It is sufficient for music, which is relatively free of language, to suggest to you, to make you think of, any question, any answer. If our minds can move from the particular to the type, we can flow with the music as we are meant to do.

What, you may ask, has this to do with mysticism, with that and thou, the inner and the outer divine? My usual answer: everything and nothing. Nothing (buggerall) and everything (the whole wide world). Humans are a species and, like every other species, our understandings depend on our senses, the methods our bodies allow us for apprehending what's around us (and even what's inside). The world as it is is the only world we have. If you tell me you've had an illumination, I will ask you what's different about the world now that you've had your vision. If you can't make me see things differently, then I won't take much notice of your vision. I will, however, concede that something important has happened if you yourself have changed. If you've been made better in some way, if your capacity to grasp the world has been improved, I'll be pleased to acknowledge this improvement, however slight, in the world we both inhabit.

God's not much use unless s/he benefits the world. The idea of god is normally linked to the idea of virtue: god wants us to be good! In this way, god is a beneficial influence. Humans also, I'm sorry to say, put god as a test of some sort, so that you, by not believing in my god, are seen as hostile, and I fight you. In hacking off your head I prove my divinity is superior. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. The idea of god, any god, call it what you like, is simply a part of human nature. Humans need gods and won't be stopped from creating them. A very large sector of the human race will go further than this and say that god is more than a creation of the human mind, s/he actually exists and we need to take account of this. Many practitioners of the perennial philosophy go further yet, saying that the divinity and the individual are linked and in ways that are mysterious to most, even the experienced and enlightened practitioners, the two, especially the junior one, can realise their one-ness. This one-ness has never made itself apparent to me, so I must take it on trust, as it were, but my trust is limited: I want to see the benefits, the implications of this vision realised, before I will give it the status of being something beneficial to humankind. All ideas contain their own contradiction, so if you tell me that the church – any one you like to name – has benefited mankind I will take that as an argument that mankind would be better off without the church. The church? If the idea has any validity, let's test it against its opposite. What's the opposite of a church? A faithless, shapeless mass, struggling in their own uncoordinated ways to achieve the spread of charity in the world? Isn't that what we've got?

Eh?

I think you will have seen by now that I am de-linking the idea of god as an article of faith (god exists) from the various ways by which mankind manages an enlargement of consciousness. Mankind, like every other creature on earth, lives within its own created realms of awareness. Dogs hear sounds that we cannot. Many creatures can operate in the darkness that befuddles us. Birds navigate the skies without the equipment carried by airliners to do the same job. Many creatures, including plants, have ways of ensuring their fertility's not wasted by reproducing only in times when the new creation has a reasonable chance. I am speaking of the genetic make-up which determines what we can and cannot do. There are edges to the consciousness of mankind. Limits. Limits can be tested, of course, and are, every day. I am not so silly, or secular, that I cannot see that mystics have operated at or beyond the limits of what might be called rational thought: that is to say, they have dealt with things, experiences, that are at or beyond our capacity to express, because when we want to express, we turn to words, and really, for all the weight of our dictionaries (my Oxford's so big I can hardly pick it up, and it comes with a magnifying glass so I can read its tiny print), our language is beyond its capacity when it tries to express what's involved in such moments, such realisations. We don't have the words we need.

Why not? This is a fascinating question, one that's beyond my powers to answer, I fear, and also outside the scope of what I've set myself to talk about, which, in this case, is music ...

... once again. What does music add to the capacity of humans to realise, to grasp and express those things which lie beyond their normal reach? (Being a tolerant man, I don't mind if you call this outer, largely undescribed region by the name of god. You can call it the Great Pantechnicon for all I care.) This is a searching question. If someone speaks Russian, Chinese, or Wathaurong for that matter, does this mean there are certain ideas, distinctions, or at least nuances available to them that aren't available to English speakers? Yes, of course. If all languages were identical, we'd only need one. Languages are the ultimate repository of the experiences of people who've shared a place and a history, so they differ.

And so musics differ, from place to place across the world. Blind Freddy (or perhaps I mean his cousin, who's deaf) can tell you that *this* music is Indian, *that* is Chinese, and whatever it is that's getting us on our feet to dance is Latin-American. Easy so far. But what, if anything, is the music saying? It's certainly saying something, or it wouldn't be so popular, and even when it's using words we have a feeling that the words are buoyed on a surge of feeling that can easily take us over, as happened to a young trainee at Puckapunyal, fifty years ago. Feelings presented on a flood (Land of Hope and Glory! God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet!). Feelings presented as broodings, introspection, whatever's discovered by examining the soul; feelings made elegant for an audience which feels its style is all-important; raunchy feelings for someone centred on sex. There's music for everybody in all their moods, but can we put a meaning to this music? I think not. Many people have remarked on the varied descriptions given to certain pieces of music by people who've all been strongly affected by them. Sometimes, to judge by what they say, you'd swear they'd been listening to different pieces. If we think about the so-called objectivity of human judgement, this unreliability gives us caution.

Music can carry almost any feeling, then, and allow others to share it: this must mean mystical feelings too, and we have confirmation of this if we listen to Beethoven's late quartets, especially the opening of the C sharp minor, opus 131. We listen to it wondering where we are, and fairly certain that it's not the world as we know it. A little later we settle on a transfigured world (the adagio; variations) and later again we resume the everyday battle we know only too well (the last movement). Something's happened! Beethoven left us for a while, and came back with something strange. So music can carry mystical experience, and make it available to others, because music is a wondrous language, but it is not itself the mystical experience, merely the bringer of an experience which someone else was able to find and then express.

Does this conclusion belittle music? I certainly hope it does not, and I feel that my argument presenting music as another sort of language enlarges the possibilities for us all, because everyone (my Uncle Teddy possibly excepted!) is open to what music brings. Making us all kin can certainly lower us (I'm thinking of that military band at Puckapunyal) but it can have the opposite effect too, and it's a fact that most of us are forever rising and falling in the levels of our taste, good, bad and awful! No, the remarkable thing about music is that it makes the potential of one of us (Mozart, you star!) available to all of us (okay Elvis, grunt, grunt, grunt), and overall this is a good thing because it enlarges the range we're open to, and an increase in consciousness is one of the few things that I can support in this world as being unarguably a good.

## Spirituality of the ordinary, the everyday

The heading of this section would seem to contain a contradiction. Spirituality is rarefied, refined, attainable only by great struggle, discipline, or both. The ordinary, the everyday, are common clay. The twain are not disposed to meet. It is my argument, however, that this is not necessarily the case. I propose to develop this argument, now, in three large steps, or movements, perhaps, to continue the musical theme.

I will take the first step by drawing on a novel I wrote some years ago called *Cloud of knowing*<sup>(8)</sup>. It is about a family who run cattle in the mountains, and the book takes for its centre their daughter Claire (there are three sons also). Claire is a very special person and a very ordinary one. Much the same is true of her father, too, a man of spirit and a man who operates well in the world he's chosen. Claire's father, Thomas Patterson, takes her about his runs, teaching her how to follow the tracks of cattle, to find her way home, to sharpen her observations, and to look in every direction for signs of what's been happening. He's good at these things yet senses that his daughter is both different and better. When he teaches her he's learning too. Something about the nature of Claire Patterson reveals itself when she's very young:

It was not her earliest memory, but it was the one that returned most frequently, giving her, on each occasion, a sense of certainty much stronger than the fear that came with it. At the school she'd just left, the headmaster, she remembered, had tried to inspire his girls by talking of the mystics' cloud of unknowing: she had clutched to herself, secretly, the knowledge that what had surrounded her in its overwhelming might, one morning when she was only six, was a cloud that brought knowing.

The Pattersons have a house on the high plains, and are aware of the phenomenon by which clouds get trapped in the valleys surrounding their leases, then escape when changing air pressure conditions occur, allowing the bottled-up cloud to flood across the higher land. Most of the family find this frightening, but Claire has an affinity for this release.

She'd heard her parents speak of it, and now, before her eyes, the valley was lifting – or so it seemed. The mass of white cloud which had been its floor was swirling as it rose. Fascinated, she slipped off her pony and walked nearer the edge, leading her mount by the reins. She felt a shiver run through him before she noticed it herself; the air was colder. The scale of what was happening was matched by its speed. It was as if a great struggle to hold the cloud had been lost, and now, like the impoverished, the crushed, the poor of the world, it was breaking out.

Looking at it, she assumed that the cloud would continue its rise, straight into heaven, but it was spreading; trees that she could have identified individually, halfway down the spur that branched off Five Mile Plain, were being swallowed. It was heading her way. She swung around. It was a long way back to the trees where the track ran onto the plain, and the cloud was coming too fast; she couldn't escape. As it came near, a faceless identity-devourer, the chill seized her; she'd heard about arctic explorers found frozen in the snow, and wondered what this thing was going to do to her. She wanted to call, but there was nobody to hear, only her pony, and he was more frightened than she was. Something told her to crouch down, to wait and see.

She squatted on her haunches, clinging to the reins. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the trees where the track was, then she faced front to see if anything was coming with it. She knew it was silly to expect something, but when a mystery revealed itself, anything might be possible. What are you? she said. What are you going to do to me?

Surround you, was the answer. Swirling white advanced, hesitation foreign to its nature, then it swallowed her in its chilly body. Claire shuddered violently. It had taken her over. It was inescapable. A duality existed in her mind. The way out was to walk to the trees, and the track; she could have done it with her eyes closed. The cloud had gripped her mind, though. It felt as if it was inside her as well as around. She felt it had come to speak to her, that it would have a voice. She felt – though it wasn't until years later that she would be able to articulate this – that it had chosen

its moment to capture her. Either it had seen her coming, and had rushed to take her in its grip, or she'd known it wanted her, and had ridden out to meet it.

What was happening was no accident; of that she was certain.

The first time Claire experiences the cloud, her parents think she's lost. They want to rescue her but are afraid of getting lost themselves. When Claire returns, unalarmed by what's happened, they discover that their child is as mysterious as the cloud.

They were still looking at her. Thomas and Belle Patterson would never have said that a child of theirs was transfigured, but they saw the strangeness about her. 'Come inside girl,' Belle commanded. 'You must be sopping wet.' Claire looked at herself. She'd been made wet by the cloud, and hadn't noticed. 'Get yourself a towel,' her mother said. 'Go to your room and take off every last thing. Put a rug around you to keep warm. I'll have to get you new things.' Belle was fussing about clothes because she couldn't reach the dimension of her child that had changed. She didn't know what had happened, and it made her furious; the child, she saw, as did Thomas, was relieved, not at having escaped the cloud, but for having had the chance to be in it.

The cloud sometimes speaks to Claire, not so much informing her as revealing her mind's intentions. Its effect is to make the unconscious conscious, and the upper levels of her mind aware of what's happening out of sight. Claire is not an artist, nor is she the type of person who declares states of mind to be higher or lower: if they're revealed to her, as happens with the cloud, then they *are*.

The message, when it came, wasn't like a voice so much as a current of thought that passed through her brain. You have to divide, it said, to be whole. You must let go, in order to hold. You must resist nothing, in order to be free. You will have children, but not yet. You must wait, and let time bring what it will. You can do nothing by yourself. Then the message ended. 'Come on Binty.' Claire joggled the beast with her knees. 'It's said all it's going to tell us today.'

The utterances of the cloud are sometimes far-reaching:

It was thicker than she'd seen it. It swirled till she could hardly see her feet. Bounty, she could tell, was terrified. He wanted to stumble through the cloud in panic, lost until it moved away, somewhere in the following day, perhaps, but Claire was keeping her feet steadily on the mark she'd gouged. When the cloud had spoken she'd want to move, and had to have a bearing.

She waited. Bounty calmed a little, his will yielding to hers. The cloud thinned; she saw, first, the mark at her feet, then, for a second, quickly vanished, some rocks to her left. They were where they should have been. That much was safe. What word?

'There's always an end', came a voice. 'It will be like this.' Claire lowered her head, looking at the mark on the ground, which appeared and disappeared as the cloud thickened or abated. 'You must be ready for the void', it said. 'Your children have replaced you.' Claire felt fear in her. Had it come to take her? Warn? Or merely to frighten, so that when it came in earnest she was ready?

'To make you ready', the voice told her. 'Look after your husband. He must come when you come.' The voice grew distant in the last word. Claire knew the message had ended. She stood in the swirling cloud, tears streaming from her eyes. She hadn't been called this time, but she'd been warned that the next call would be for her - and her husband: she'd often wondered if one would outlast the other, and she'd been told ... 'It didn't say how many years I've got,' she told Bounty. 'I have to make the most of them.'

Claire's husband, Clive, becomes curious about his wife's connection with the cloud. He wants to hear its messages, but never succeeds.

He studied her, troubled by the indifference, or carelessness, in the way she spoke of him. 'You don't get lost, do you. How come you can find your way?'

His wife pointed at the ground. 'Ask yourself how you know where you are. I can tell you your answer. You look at the sky, the ranges, the belts of trees. Things that are level with your eye, or higher. Well and good. But what about when you can't see them? You need to know what the earth's like, under your feet. Here!' She pointed again. 'Right there! What's it doing, how does the

land lie, beneath your feet, where, most of us, most of the time, aren't looking? That's its message, really, now that I think about it.'

It's a matter of fact answer, but Claire isn't always like this in response to the messages the cloud brings her.

It teased her for a minute, thinning and lifting, so she could see a little again; there were rocks, grass, and even a few trees at the beginning of the spur. Then it thickened, and she could hear it breathing in her brain, not ready, yet, to speak, but preparing. The readiness, she sensed, had to be in her. It would speak if she was listening. It would speak only if it knew she could hear.

'I'm ready,' she told the cloud.

It swirled more thickly. She could hardly see her pony's tail. He was shivering, stamping his front feet occasionally, scared to pull away from her grip. 'Shoosh,' she told her horse. 'I want to hear what it says.'

The voice, when it came, was like what she imagined the waves of the sea would be like if they could talk - and who, now, would say they couldn't? It didn't speak in words, it made her mind look both ways, this and that, as if telling her she must make a choice. 'I'll do what you say,' she said.

It was asking her to choose between short and long, and it was saying that this was not one but many choices: short meant wild, headstrong, risk-taking, adventurous, and ready to die. Before it said any more she gave it the answer: 'Long. Fairly long. That's what I choose.'

Then it put another continuum before her, power at one end, clarity of intention at the other. She watched, introspectively, as the alternatives revealed themselves: with power were aligned anger, violence, duplicity, subtlety, lies, brutality, wealth, despair, and a host of others she couldn't recognise, but wanted to keep away from. She looked to the other end of what was offered.

At this second pole were delicacy, thoughtfulness, reciprocity, and the twin certainties of having little to possess and much in the definition of feeling; she inclined her head. The cloud, knowing, granted her a little respite; for a moment she could see the trees at the beginning of the spur, then it swallowed them again, and she knew she had another choice to make.

What would it be? And would it be the last, or would they stretch out, these alternatives, like torture until she had something forced out of her? Powerless, she waited.

The cloud made her look to the right this time, and put into her a demand she was too young to grasp. It was something about how to balance what she would do. What she would be. It was making her think in the abstract, this time, not letting her choose a place along a line. It wanted her to speak, and she didn't know what to say, because she didn't know what it was asking.

'I'm only six,' she said. 'You have to tell me.'

The cloud swirled silently. She felt it was angry with her, but this time it was up to the cloud to make a choice, not her; she couldn't help it if she didn't understand. Then it put a series of pictures in her mind. There was a woman in each picture, and she fancied that it was her grown-up self that she was seeing. Each time the figure came to her it changed. It was singing, for instance, and it closed its mouth, then it put its hands to its ears and its face grew dark with strain. Claire shook her head. The figure sang again, radiating music. Claire nodded; that was what she wanted to be! Choice after choice was put in her mind, and she chose. Sometimes the cloud tried to trick her, or was it to test her, by putting the form she wanted to choose last instead of first, and sometimes the choice was not a clear good versus bad, but a contest of alternatives, between a Claire that got her way because she was strong and a Claire that listened before she made up her mind. Claire felt the cloud was trying to trick her, and didn't like it.

'I've already answered that!' she said.

The cloud rushed about her, thicker than before. Her pony was terrified, but fear flew from her body; Claire knew she'd caught the cloud up to tricks and had made it admit it should be honest: was that the ultimate test, the question all the other questions had been leading to? She felt it had been. She stood up.

'I'm waiting,' she told the cloud. 'Is there anything else?'

There was only silence in her mind. The visitation was over.

Claire's experience with the cloud is ultimately her experience of herself: the cloud, in appearing to lie outside her, gives her a way of objectifying herself. When she talks to it, or it to her, the

dialogue has some objectivity. It's a process she feels she has to trust, not least because there's no better process. This, she thinks when the cloud is talking, is the truest thing that happens. I am never better than I am in these moments. Connected as she is with her parents, her husband and her children, the cloud is her most accurate interlocutor. It is the most charitable of voices because the most indifferent:

Lightning flashed, far away, and thunder, at the slower speed of sound, rolled across the valley. Again Claire felt isolated to the point of being meaningless. 'There's nothing,' she said. 'No god looking after us. Only our own charity to warm the world, our cruelties to fill it with horror. Up here I can see it. Down there' – she was thinking of Weldon, and perhaps Ben Avon – 'you can tell me anything and I'll think at least it could be true. But here' – the thunder rumbled again, underscoring a flash she hadn't noticed – 'there's nothing but this vastness, and hardly a soul to penetrate it with warmth. My eyes, my consciousness, are not the only intelligence, because there's birds and animals, and maybe even trees, but I rule over all that's before me. I won't always rule, because I'll be dead one day, but I'm lucky, I've got children to go on when I'm like my mother and prefer to stay inside so I don't have to look at these limits, which are, in a way, reminders of my end.' That, she decided, was what gave the scene its grandeur: that was what grandeur was, in fact – an absolute indifference to human need.

Claire's mountains are like an extension of her mind, or, to put it the other way around, her existence is only a slight accretion on theirs. The mountains are not eternal – a human word – but they last longer than people who think they can own them. Claire is well aware of how humble they make her feel, and show her to be. This, I think – and this is why I introduce *Cloud of knowing* into this book – is neither a religious nor a secular thought. Modern environmentalism, the seeing of ourselves as only one of the host of species occupying the earth, provides us with a way out of the restrictive vanities that humans are forever inventing. If humans are capable of linking with forces outside themselves, if one tiny being can feel an attachment to all being, as the mystics tell us, then there is more than one way to do it, and more than one meaning to make out of whatever happens. It seems to me that the mysticism that Aldous Huxley offers (and the many greater, earlier, figures he draws on) all derives from the idea that a soul can benefit from detaching itself from this world and attaching itself to, or finding in itself, a greater force that lies outside the self as well as within it. The overall argument of my book is that it is more beneficial in the long run to think in another way. If I recall my own youthful efforts to discover 'the ground of being', as the mystics called it, then I see my younger self looking for an escape, a means of avoidance, when that young man would have been better advised to think of his goal as a destination which might or might not be reached: better by far, I now think, to hope for an emergence from foolishness and excessive attachment after one has done everything necessary for a well-ordered, constructive and useful life, rather than to try to get away from human failings while one is still immersed in them.

Perhaps Saint Augustine was right to ask for a delay (a very long one?) in attaining the chastity he thought his god required?

Now, for the second movement in this, the last part of my discussion of the state of blessedness, I wish to enlarge on a few of the things mentioned in passing already. Let's return to the storm clouds under which a little boy rode home (the first essay in this book). This experience was never replicated in my childhood, nor has it been since. I've seen storm clouds often enough and will do so again, but the experience, the awe and mystery, of engagement with something bigger, distant, yet quite immediate, has never been repeated. Human beings are strange when it comes to repeating ourselves, or not. Repetition first. If we're criminals, drunks, we can't help repeating ourselves. The sternest warnings can't break us of our habits. Some of us only know how to fail, and can't be made to succeed.

And now the opposite. If we have an experience, it may not be possible to repeat it. Why is this? A great love, or a moment of insight: can these things be made to happen again? Usually not. Scientific break-throughs hover on the verge of happening, the moment's seized by a Darwin and/or a Wallace, and the moment's past. The next excitement will be at a different, shifting, point. The same thing can't be discovered twice. Why not? Because it's already been found. In an earlier section of this book I described my feelings on reaching the top of Castle Hill, in Gippsland, and also my feelings on leaving it after sun-up the following day. I've never been back. Forty years have passed. Why haven't I been back? That's easy. The place is still there but I've moved on. I've had the struggle to walk through the bush, to make a big effort (The Jump-up!) and I've reached the considerable peak of looking down from the peak and, all this having been done, it's necessary to do something else. The same peak can't be climbed twice, because it's not the same the second time around.

I think your thorough-going mystic would say that this is a false comparison, and that my idea of life as a journey, an odyssey, a pilgrimage, even, won't stand comparison with the idea of life illuminated when a soul reaches, or makes contact with its ever-present reality. They would say, I think, that there is an absolute, it's illuminating to attach oneself to its presence, and that it's forever there: that is to say, eternity is more than a word, it's never far away and it's constantly available to the searching mind.

I can think of only two replies to this. The first is that the human body declines, and no contact with anything outside or inside the human body can stop the processes of ageing and decay. We are destined to die and no amount of contact with Presence X can change this.

My second answer is, simply enough, that it does not seem so to me. It may be so for others but my own experience doesn't make me think that the basis for a lasting illumination exists. Humans, of course, are very different creatures. You will swear by something that means little or nothing to me. And vice versa. There's no problem in this if we accept that truth is relative, not absolute, and that truths can differ, between people, places and periods, and they do so all the time. You may say that this is nonsense, and that if we run in front of a heavily laden truck as it thunders down the highway there's no doubt we'll be killed. Relativism be buggered! I will remind you, in my turn, that the subject matter of these essays is the performance of the human mind when asked to operate at the edges of what it can do well. We all know how clever humans are until you ask them to do something they're not adapted to doing. That's when they either flop, or behave very strangely. They perform the weirdest intellectual dances because they can't walk straight ahead. You can look around you if you want to know what I mean by this.

One last reconsideration before we move to the third section of this essay. I said, at the end of Music (1), that 'I needed music that was triumphally assertive ... or music that took itself apart from the daily activity of mankind ...' I don't think this is true any longer, nor has it been for quite a few years (though I still love the music that I gave as my examples). Music (1) describes a young man coming into a world that is threatening, where people lose life, lose fortune, or never become the sort of people they would like to be. Young people are often embattled, most of all, I think, because they simply don't understand life well enough to know what their struggles really are. It's easy to lose one's way, and just as easy to never have a way to find! This being the case, young people are drawn to music, to understandings, where things are presented as a battle with victory by one side regarded as triumphal and victory by the other side as a disaster, leading to despair, enslavement, misery and everything else we see as black. We have the saying 'he sees things in black and white' for someone whose thinking is too simple, who needs complexities reduced to slogans so his mind can operate in the simple way that allows it to function best: function, that is to say, inaccurately but with brutal simplicity. Firing a gun is easier than thinking, for some of us at least.

What music, what ideas, should we look for as we grow older? Do we want the world redeemed, or the world accepted? Something complex, something simple? A little bit of everything, to give variety, and fit the time and place? Any or all of the above, I suppose. Let me tell you about something that happened many years ago, not long after I was married. My wife and I left our little son in the care of my mother and my Aunt Olly (mentioned earlier in these pages) and made a trip to Bourke, the last great outpost of New South Wales on the upper Darling, most famous for the spaces beyond it (*back o' Bourke!*). I went into the newsagent's and saw, to my delight (and suppressed embarrassment) that they stocked postcards that they must have had for years. I knew in a flash that I'd come on something so old-fashioned as to be valuable, to people of my kind, anyway. I'd read George Orwell's essay 'The Art of Donald McGill'<sup>(9)</sup>, in which he describes a type of postcard that the English had printed for decades, both prurient and quaintly, touchingly, frank. It's a sort of Sancho Panza comic art, Orwell says, setting the attitudes of these cards against the more virtuous, more presentable attitudes of decent society. In making out a case for them, Orwell had delighted me. But there they were, on the racks of a newsagent in one of the last places I'd have thought of finding them. There was a rack on the street, and another inside the door, dozens of these gems, these jewels, and I wanted to buy the lot.

But I was embarrassed too. I could not make myself be honest, grab the lot and pay for them. I'd have been ashamed of going to the counter with all these raucous, indecent things in my hand. The lot of them? No. I picked out two or three, the lady at the counter put them in an envelope(!), and I wrote something on them to a couple of trusted friends before I got rid of them in a post-box. Married I might have been, and a father, but I wasn't used to dealing with sexuality in public, even via something I wanted to laugh at. A part of me was still struggling with the same indecencies that the postcards turned into a certain sort of joke.

What has this to do with the price of mystic clouds? Everything and nothing, as usual. I was able to laugh at the postcards' jokes as explicated by George Orwell with his customary mastery, but the position he took up was not one I had attained for myself. Such maturity as I possessed was borrowed from Orwell. I had understood his understanding but hadn't reached it for myself. It sat on a shelf in my mind, incompletely owned.

This is a reservation I cannot keep out of my mind when considering states of blessedness. If they're not permanent, or semi-so, if they're not fully absorbed into the daily thinking and life habits of the person involved with them, then they're like stars that are momentarily glimpsed, then obscured by cloud. My rule: if you can't steer by them, ignore.

This brings me, finally, to the everyday. The mundane. The ordinary, the common clay. Human society is in its way an ordering of importances which we are forced to obey. I'd like to listen to Mozart but I need to get the bread - first! 'Get your priorities right!' we tell young people who want to buy something fashionable when they should have their uniform dry-cleaned, ready for school. 'First things first!' we tell our young, but that's only a way of asserting that our first things are more important than theirs. If illumination comes from a different moral universe from the one we inhabit, there's not much we can use it for, unless we choose to live by it and accept any consequences that come along. Some of us are brave, or persistent, enough to do this. Most are not. Humans are social animals - crowd creatures - as much as we're individuals. Belonging normally takes precedence unless our situation forces us to separate from those who surround us. Individuality's encouraged only if it creates no difficulties. Others are the judge of that, probably more than we are. They'll let us know if they think we're weird, unusual, not toeing the line. Only in a religious community can people regularly seek a state of blessedness without being thought - known - to be strange.

Or else we can do it in private ... but even then we need people we can discuss it with. What are we doing? Where do we take it from here? Why are we doing this? What's it all about?

My own accommodation is to try to leave the doors and windows of perception as open as possible, all the time, so that things will be noticed as they pass, or even try to enter. Here's something<sup>(10)</sup> that happened to me some years ago, when I was returning from the United States, and, due to the American airline's wish to exploit a loophole in their country's agreement with Australia, the plane took a route I hadn't expected, via Japan. This quirk had an unexpected effect:

He drowsed. The plane droned. The film ended, another followed, just as tedious. He drowsed. The plane pushed through the night. He drowsed.

Adrift in air, carried southwards to his home, he became aware of ... something starting, like the flickering that occupied a screen before the pictures flowed. It was an awareness, and he thought of radar, about which he knew nothing. But something was coming through, a message arriving. It wouldn't focus, he couldn't grasp, nor see nor hear ... then it came clear, suddenly and with no room for doubt. He was directly above his daughter, who'd travelled with him on many occasions. The awareness was only one way. She lay beneath him, thirty-five thousand feet down, asleep. He didn't see her, he knew. So that was where he was. The pilots of the plane, up the front in a semi-darkened cabin, had instruments measuring electronic signals that told them where they were. An older apparatus was working inside him. He was directly above his daughter, deep down far below. He knew the house, the very room, on the hill that rose up in the city of her choice, which endured cyclonic lashings when its rain-shadow wasn't in force. All was still and peaceful around her. There were no words. It was a simple current, like the last visions of themselves some people send their loved ones as they die, or drown, or know their end is near. He'd often wondered about these connections, and here he was caught in one. It seemed a rarity that put him apart from others who didn't, or couldn't, take in such messages. She was below.

Minutes passed. A steward came down the aisle, darkened now that the film had ended. Andy put out his hand. 'Can you tell me where we are?' The steward thought. 'Somewhere over northern Australia,' he said, as if that helped. 'I can do better than that,' Andy said. 'We're directly over Townsville.' The steward made no comment, and slipped away in the gloom.

Knowledge which one would have thought unavailable had entered my mind. Sitting in the dark, trying to block out a trashy film, I knew where I was without recourse to the pilots' instruments. Impossible? Of course. But I knew. The mind has powers that are difficult to describe. In the days of the British Empire, when the public servants and traders of the home country had dealings worldwide with 'native' peoples, Brits at the various frontiers flooded their home magazines with accounts of occult experiences they'd had, when impossible things had happened. Journalistic fashion eliminates most of this today but I have no doubt that things are still occurring. What do these occult experiences mean? Are they any more or less real than the mystics' experiences which gave rise to this book? No. The human mind is like an engine which works well at certain temperatures, not so well when it's too hot or too cold. The mind is fairly reliable when it's dealing with the things that are central to a culture, and beyond that ...

Beyond that?

Beyond that the mind is strangely intuitive, not to be ignored, and not specially to be trusted either. Those are my thoughts, dear reader: what are yours?

## Notes

1. *The Perennial Philosophy*, by Aldous Huxley, Chatto & Windus, London, 1947
2. *Mapping the paddocks*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1985
3. *Play Together, Dark Blue Twenty*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1986
4. *Wainwrights' Mountain*, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 1997
5. *House of trees*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1987
6. *Victoria Challis*, Collins/Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991
7. *Music at night*, by Aldous Huxley, The Albatross Modern Continental Library, Hamburg, 1935
8. *Cloud of knowing*, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 2006 (The quotations from the novel span many years in Claire's life; hence the differing names of her horses! My apologies to readers if this is confusing.)
9. 'The Art of Donald McGill' in *Decline of the English Murder & other essays* by George Orwell, Penguin, Melbourne, 1965
10. *Janus*, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 2001

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